

“AMERICAN SERIES” OF AN AZERBAIJANI ARTIST

Tahir Salahov

It is known that during the Cold War between the United States and the USSR, cultural contacts between the two countries were extremely limited. Creative trips were sporadic and occurred only during the short periods of detente. Interestingly, in one of these periods of warming in relations, Azerbaijani artist Tahir Salahov visited the United States and reflected his experiences in a series of paintings called “Across America”. We would like to talk about this “American series” of the artist.

Initially, about the artist himself. Tahir Salahov was born in the family of a politician in Baku in 1928, but his father fell victim to Stalin’s repressions and was rehabilitated only after World War II. From an interview with the artist: “My father was arrested on 29 September 1937, I remember it well, I was nine years old. He was first secretary of Lachin District”¹. (1) Educated at the Azim Azimzade Azerbaijan Art School, he entered the Surikov Moscow State Art Institute (2). At that time, it was a real feat – in most cases, being branded as a “son of an enemy of the people” closed the path to institutions of higher education in the country.

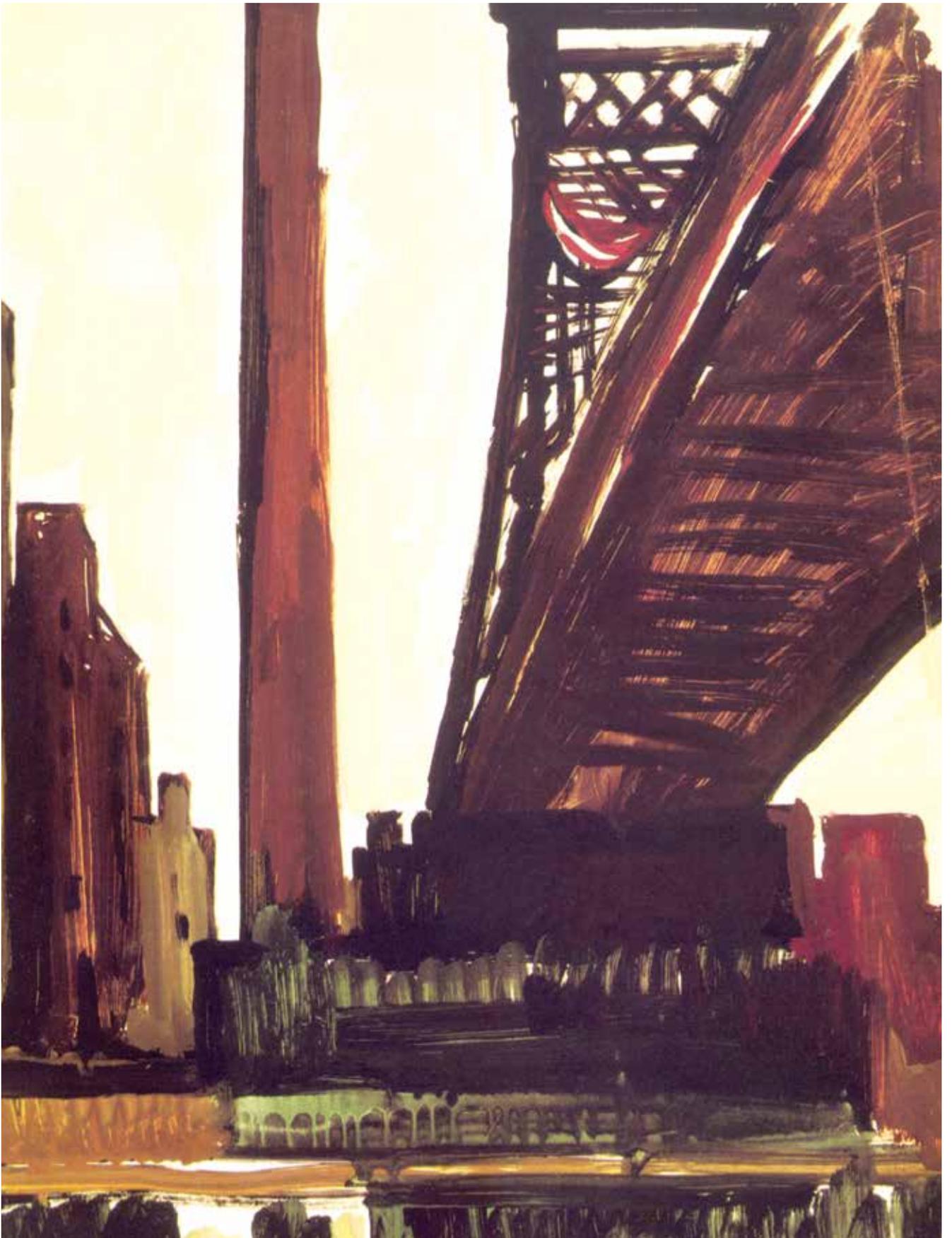
A son of the Land of Fire, Salahov devoted his first works to oilmen. The oil theme was very popular at the



time, but the attention of the audience and experts was drawn by the style of the young artist - instead of pictures in the style of socialist realism Salahov drew

¹ Lachin District is an administrative unit of the Azerbaijan Republic in Karabakh. It is currently occupied by the armed forces of Armenia

“Old Bridge, New York”



“Golden Bridge”



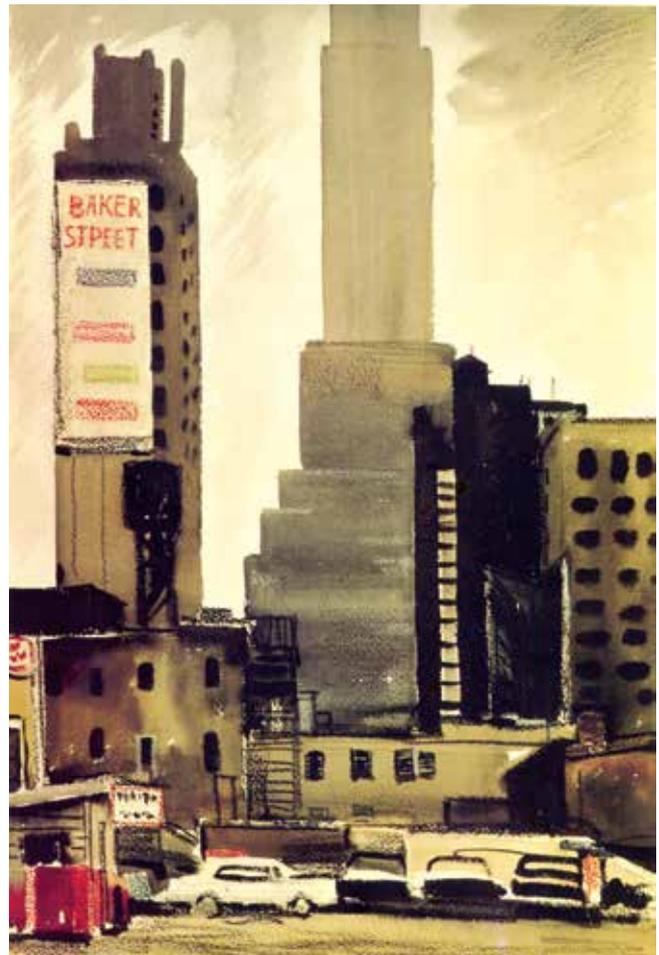
ordinary workers without embellishment. On all his paintings we see a man - working, talented, great and creating; in the words of the artist himself: “There will always be that great and beautiful world on the earth, which has been the subject of poetic art research for millennia. This world is man.” (3).

Tahir Salahov soon became one of the most prominent Soviet artists of the “Khrushchev thaw” and one of the founders and leaders of the so-called “severe style” in painting.

The gallery of portraits, landscapes of Absheron and scenery for productions created by the artist - all works show that with mean laconic lines and colors, he remained true to the “severe style”. Soon after taking leadership positions in the Union of Artists of Azerbaijan and then in the Union of Artists of the USSR, he tried to organize creative business trips for artists abroad and at the same time, sought to invite Western artists to the Soviet Union with exhibitions. Thanks to the efforts of Salahov, exhibitions of such famous artists as Francis Bacon, Günther Uecker, James Rosenquist, Robert Rauschenberg,

Jannis Kounellis, Rufino Tamayo and others were held in Russia. In response to a journalist’s question “You have been chairman of the Union of Artists of the USSR for decades. You can be called an artist in power?“, Tahir Salahov replied: “In power are those who long for it. And I found myself there at the request of my fellow artists who elected me to this position. Someone tried to stay away from power and not to admit it openly, but there was no such antagonism in me. I tried to justify the confidence of my colleagues.” (4).

Talent and amazing performance brought him recognition first in Azerbaijan - he was awarded the title of People’s Artist of Azerbaijan, and then in the Soviet Union - he was awarded the State Prize of the USSR, the title of People’s Artist of the USSR and the title of Hero of Socialist Labor. Soon he won recognition abroad too: after a series of exhibitions outside the country, he was elected an honorary corresponding member of the Union of Artists of Austria (1983), a corresponding member of the French Academy of Arts (1987), and vice-president and honorary president of the Interna-



“New York”

“New York. At a Gas Station”

tional Association of Plastic Arts at UNESCO (1983). It would take an entire page to list all the titles and awards of the world-famous Azerbaijani artist. We should note after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he was elected vice-president of the International Federation and the Artists' Union of Russia (1992), a corresponding member of the San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Spain, 1998) and an honorary member of the Artists' Union of Germany (Rhineland-Palatinate). For 20 years, Tahir Salahov led the Union of Artists of the USSR and gave about 30 years to educational work, having prepared a whole galaxy of famous artists in Azerbaijan and Russia (5).

Salahov's works are represented in major museums of Russia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine and other former Soviet states and are found in many museums and private collections around the world.

In the multilateral and bright activity of Tahir Salahov a series of works devoted to the numerous overseas trips to Europe, Asia and America occupy a special place.

Let's consider the most famous pictures of the series "Across America" drawn by the artist in 1965 under the influence of his trip to the United States (6).



The first impression of the viewer is bridges and skyscrapers – these are the main themes of paintings from the series. It would seem a rather limited set, especially in light of the fact that the artist puts most of the paintings vertically and uses watercolors, a felt-tip pen and occasionally gouache. However, none of the paintings is a repetition of another, and each painting is unique.

A special place in the series is occupied by the picture "Skyscrapers of Chicago" (56x37cm). The picture painted with watercolors and gouache strikes with its uniqueness and conciseness of construction. Using only light gray, dark gray and black colors, the artist managed to convey the oppressive vertical of skyscrapers. And among them, as if in the bottom of a well, there is a skating rink. In this concrete jungle where even snow has nowhere to stay and nowhere to settle, the horizontal surface of the skating rink provides a contrast. And in the center of the plane, the figure of a young man in skates attracts attention. With two or three stinging strokes of black and only one stroke of red paint, the artist showed life and movement. It is about these



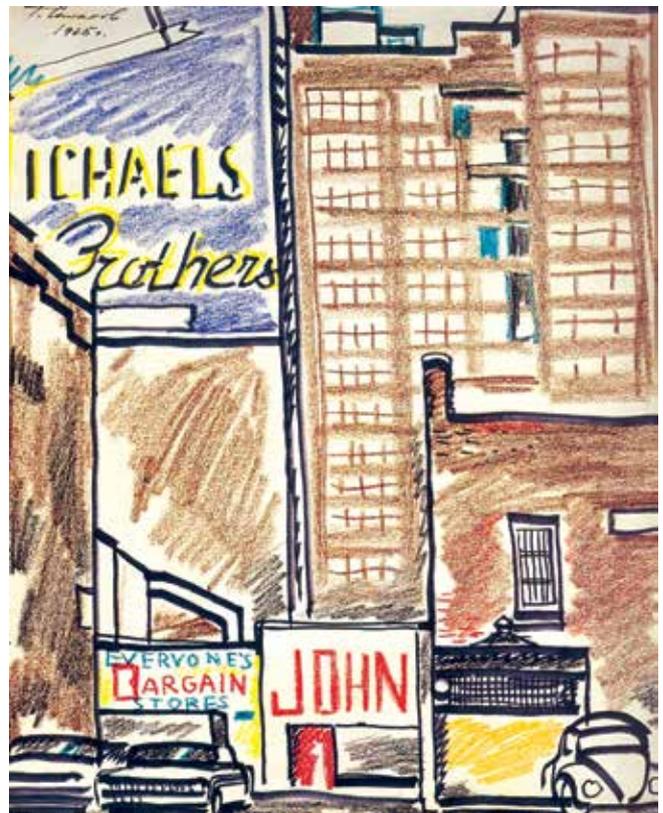
and mighty steel beams are shown with scant lines and without details.

The painting "New York. At a Gas Station" (60x42cm), drawn with watercolors, draws attention with an unusual light pink square in the center of the picture. A closer look at the foreground shows the outlines of a gas station and cars, and the black figure of a man is visible. The pink square is the wall of a house, and the dark vertical lines of skyscrapers and black adverts can be seen behind it. The heavy power of the skyscrapers is slightly mitigated with gaps of windows and blurred wall surfaces.

The continuation of the theme of American bridges can be seen in the picture "Old Bridge in New York" (60x43cm). The viewer appears to be on the surface of the water (in a boat) under the bridge and sees everything upside down. As a result, the steel supports painted with black and brown gouache and the bridge look suppressing and even threatening. The effect of human insignificance among these machines increases with the vertical lines of skyscrapers and an industrial pipe. The bridge, skyscrapers and pipe - all this is reflected in the water, probably dirty, heavy, almost stagnant and lifeless. The effect of heaviness is only enhanced by the black rectangles of the bridge supports.

paintings that the artist said: "Color conveys the state of mind most accurately... I never aspire to put the full palette and all colors on one canvas. For me, the most important thing is the content of the picture. The balance of white and black has always worried me as an artist. And a little bit of red." (8) Despite the paucity of paints used by the artist, the picture makes the viewer to peer into it, literally seek out the details and even conjecture what remains outside of the picture that is now kept at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

The Mustafayev Azerbaijan State Museum of Art keeps the painting "Golden Bridge" (56x38cm). The central vertical of the painting is a support of a bridge, which the artist shows from a somewhat unexpected angle – from the access road from one bank. Black, light and dark, and brown watercolors - that's the whole arsenal of colors, with which the artist showed only one of the largest US bridges. The viewer does not see the entire length of the bridge, but the haze in the distance on the opposite bank allows us to imagine the scale of the structure. Huge supports, thick steel ropes



“New York. Skyscrapers”

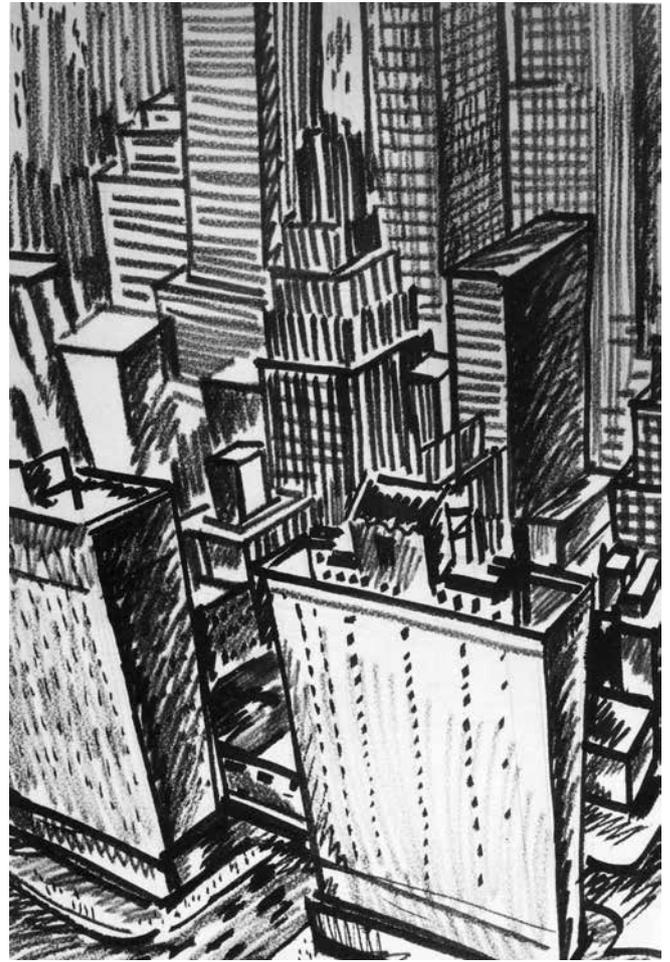
Among the paintings of the series “Across America”, special attention is drawn by the works that show the streets of New York, especially streets overshadowed by skyscrapers. The paintings “New York” (felt-tip pen, 58x37cm), “New York – Avenue of the Americas” (pencil, 55x38cm) and “New York Motif” (felt-tip pen, chalks, 45x36cm) are somewhat similar, yet different. In all three works the plot is vertical, and the viewer, who seems to be on the street, sees cars and huge skyscrapers hanging over him. And at the same time, the pictures stick in mind with their individuality. In the painting “New York” two skyscrapers sharply rise over the gray mass of the street, and the sky, the earth and everything around is performed in gray colors. The work “New York – Avenue of the Americas” is performed more clearly, with sharp horizontal and vertical lines. The slice of the sky seen behind the skyscrapers is performed with blue colors. One or two elements in red form a sharp contrast and bring in some gusto. And the “New York Motif” looks totally unexpected. The light brown walls of the skyscrapers are covered with blue windows, large yellow and red posters and signs. It would seem that the views are of the same type - but how diversely they are shown.

The works “New York. Parking Lot” (felt-tip pen, pastel, 43x35cm), “Freeways of New York” (felt-tip pen, pastel, 36x54cm), “States - Empire - Building” (watercolor, 56x38cm), performed by the artist in color, are also interesting.

The series “Across America” has several works performed in black and white graphics. The work “New York. Skyscrapers” (felt-tip pen, 55x37cm) stands out among them. If in other paintings of the artist the viewer is on the street of an American city, here he is floating above the buildings. The viewer sees square, rectangular, pyramid-shaped and stepped skyscrapers that make up a concrete jungle. And although small dots - figures of people can be distinguished at the bottom, the artist did not provide any detail that could enliven the general background.

The visual tools of the artist in the series of paintings “Across America” are extremely laconic, and in most cases, the sharpness of black, gray and light colors is softened by the somewhat bluish-gray sky, the brown color of the street and one or two elements in red. The sky appears to be a continuation and an integral part of homes. Although the canvas shows only a part of space (streets, block or bridge), the viewer mentally completes the picture.

The works of Tahir Salahov show us the USA - industrial, urban, straightforward and quite tough. ❀

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