

GALLERY OF HEROES

The artist Vladimir Sulyagin worked in secret to keep alive the memory of those gifted Russians persecuted by Stalin. Hilary Spurling, one of the first Westerners to discover his work, previews an exhibition of his collages

VLADIMIR SULYAGIN was born in the Urals in 1942 and was 12 years old when Stalin died. He grew up in a world of shadows peopled by poets whose names could not be mentioned, writers whose books were never published and artists whose work was never seen.

As an art student at the Stroganov Institute in Moscow in the Sixties, he found that Matisse (like Dalí) was still officially a suspect influence. So were traditional Russian icon painters. A student interested in both posed constant problems for his teachers. 'Sulyagin may be a good artist,' some said, 'but he is breaking the rules.'

Accused of formalism, he trained as a muralist, specialising in the ceramics used to decorate Soviet institutes and sports halls: a low-grade job offering meagre pay and little or no freedom of expression.

For 20 years he continued to paint in his own time, but it was not until 1987 that Sulyagin found the medium he was to make his own. He began to cut his heroes' faces out of wrapping paper — grey or brown with scraps of black, red or crumpled silver foil — sticking them on to squares of plain white card, using the cheapest throw-away materials to catch the spirit of people who didn't officially exist. 'My portraits are all spirits,' Sulyagin said the first time we met. 'Spirits that haunt the conscience.'

A Russian friend took my husband and me to see him in Moscow in the spring of 1990. Sulyagin was working in a borrowed room at the top of a dilapidated apartment block scheduled for demolition. He met us at the door: a stocky man in his late 40s, hospitable in the courtly Russian way, with an egg-shaped head fringed by ginger hair and beard, a broad smile, penetrating eyes and the prominent, slightly lumpy nose he has somehow incorporated into several of his collage portraits. As soon as we were settled,



Left, Mikhail Bulgakov (1891–1940), novelist and playwright. His work was banned in the USSR from 1926 until his death. Above, Piotr Kapitska (1894–1984), Nobel Prize-winning atomic scientist. The pipe is a tribute to his years in Cambridge

he produced a pack of these portraits and began dealing through them, holding them up one at a time for us to look at before calling out their names, like a conjurer performing a card trick.

Among the first he showed us was a handsome, dreamy boy with high, white forehead, bold, black eyes and sensual lips, a profile that seemed to float like a photographic image on, or just below, the surface of the paper. 'Boris Pasternak,' said Sulyagin softly.

Next came a much simpler silhouette — bullet head, cropped hair, bull neck, jug ears — cut from a single sheet of coarse grey paper and framed by the bars of a narrow window or perhaps a prison cell. 'Osip Mandelstam,' said

Two portraits of film-maker Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948). The first shows the director of 'The Battleship Potemkin' – young, mercurial and full of Revolutionary zeal; the second, a man broken by years of conflict and compromise with Stalin



Sulyagin (Mandelstam died in a labour camp in 1938). 'My portrait shows him cornered, boxed in by crushing weights and reduced to a shadow.'

Third was a jaunty piratical character in tight trousers with a single silver boot: the film-maker Sergei Eisenstein when young, full of dash and swagger, fresh from his Revolutionary triumph with *The Battleship Potemkin*. A second portrait showed the same man in middle age after years of battling with Stalin, the Eisenstein who collapsed and died of a heart attack while working on *Ivan the Terrible*: a death's head with anxious eyes and a kiss curl planted in the middle of his grinning, white clown's face.

Sulyagin often makes two versions of one subject; for Vladimir Mayakovsky he made three. In the first he is the poet of the Revolution: confident, casual, debonair, a Twenties romantic with a cigarette between his lips. The second uses the letters of his name, cut out in the Futurists' favourite red and black, to form the clapper of a bell ringing in the Communist new dawn; the last shows a face disintegrating under pressure (Mayakovsky shot himself in 1930), cut and torn from yellowish-grey paper with a scrap gummed like sticking plaster across the corner of his mouth.

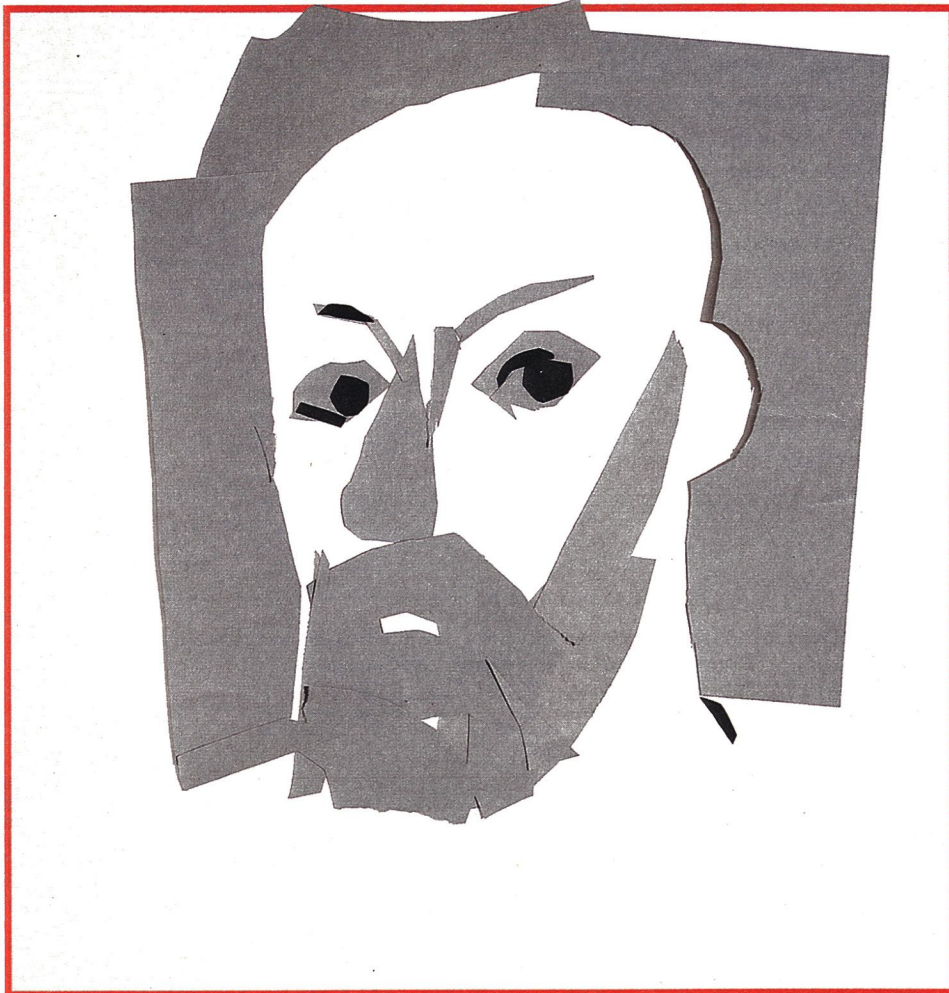
The effect is startling. Though the subjects of these portraits are often tragic, Sulyagin's collages confront their suffering, courage, defeat or defiance with an answering panache. The images come exuberantly alive, each one so like its sitter, each at the same time so full of wit, humour and visual invention. He explained that he had always wanted to make portraits that would work on different levels, conveying something of the individual's fate as well as the physical likeness and — much the hardest to bring off — the essence of what he called the genius of each subject he had chosen.

'I had been thinking for 20 years how to do it,' he said. 'I was looking for the method, for the medium, for the form in which they might take shape. I found it in 1987. Suddenly I got the idea for a portrait, which I then made — *Marina Tsvetayeva When Young*.'

As soon as he had cut out that first image, Sulyagin left the house, walking the streets for hours. When he went home at last to check if his idea had worked, he found himself muttering what Pushkin had said on finishing *Eugene Onegin*: '*Ai da, Pushkin, ai da, sykin sin!*' [Hey, Pushkin, you son-of-a-bitch.]

The first of Sulyagin's two versions of Marina Tsvetayeva was based on a famous photograph of the poet as a young girl before the Revolution, newly-married and wearing a cross on a chain around her neck. 'She stares forth, plain, bold yet vulnerable, at her own unfolding life, yet around her neck already hangs the noose with which she will kill herself,' wrote Margaret Drabble, describing her own meeting with Sulyagin when he exhibited his portraits in London in 1991. In the second, she is transformed into a glittering





Top, the poet Marina Tsvetayeva (1892–1941). This portrait, Sulyagin's first experiment in collage, was based on a famous photograph. Bottom, Henri Matisse (1869–1954), Sulyagin's inspiration. All reference to his work was suppressed under Stalin

icon of power and immortality, 'a silver image for a poet of the great Silver Age'. The story of her life is charged with a terrible historical pain and a desperate emotional intensity; Sulyagin catches both. This first portrait taught Sulyagin the use of signs and symbols, how to distil a whole personality from one or two salient details: Tsvetayeva's cross, Bulgakov's famous monocle, Anna Akhmatova's turban and her stern Roman profile.

Once he had mastered the technique, his work developed quickly. It was as if his discovery of the collage portrait — part icon, compounded with a dash of late Matisse — had resolved a struggle that went back to his student days.

The portraits of his heroes would have been unthinkable before 1987, but there was no question, even after *perestroika*, of showing or selling in Russia; exhibitions, studios and right of access to materials were privileges still reserved for members of the official Soviet Artists' Union, to which Sulyagin had never belonged.

Thus, the portraits I first saw two years ago were all made 'for the drawer', where Russian writers have traditionally stowed their manuscripts in times of trouble. But in November 1990, Sulyagin exhibited two of them at a show in Cambridge and brought 15 more to London where, all through that winter, a steady stream of people flowed through our house to see them.

The result was a first one-man show at London's Royal Festival Hall in April 1991, the success of which led, a year later, to another at the Museum of Modern Art in Oxford. Sales in England enabled Sulyagin to move, with his wife and two children, from the cramped room they had shared in a communal flat to a self-contained, two-roomed flat in Moscow, where he also showed for the first time earlier this year. This month a selection of his collage portraits can be seen at the Cheltenham Festival of Literature in celebration of the publication of *Paper Spirits*, a book of his work.

I hope the originals find a permanent home in Russia. One way of filling the crucial 20th-century void in any Russian equivalent of our own National Portrait Gallery would be with this extraordinary collection commemorating Soviet non-persons. When Sulyagin made these portraits, he had no way of knowing if a time would come when they could be seen by anyone but friends. He had brooded long and hard, reading, researching, collecting photographs, experimenting with cut-paper books and screens, taking his technique of abstraction from a visiting exhibition of Japanese art he had seen in Moscow.

'The Japanese have perfected this art of reducing the means to almost nothing so as to catch the spirit of what they paint,' he said. 'I wanted to make something out of nothing. Something that would move people to tears.'

Sulyagin's portraits will be on show at the Town Hall, Cheltenham from Oct 9–18. 'Paper Spirits' is published by Chatto & Windus on Oct 22, at £25