

FACE VALUE

NEVER PUBLISHED MAGAZINE PORTRAITS ON VIEW IN GREENWICH

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By Abby Luby

Many of the subjects painted by Boris Chaliapin some 30 years ago were destined for immortality via the cover of *TIME* magazine. Chaliapin, a Russian-American artist who lived from 1902 -1972, created over 400 portraits for *TIME* between 1942 to 1970.

Recently, about 138 cover paintings were discovered in the attic of the Easton home of the artist's second wife Helcia. These rarely seen works can be seen in the upcoming show "Boris Chaliapin: Faces of History," opening Thursday at the Flinn Gallery in Greenwich Library.



"Helcia called it a treasure trove and that's what was there," says Debra Fram, whose husband was Helica's grandnephew. Fram, York Baker and Barbara Richards are the show's curators. "A few years ago Helcia stayed with us and started to talk about Boris' work that was stored in the house," Fram recalls. Helcia Chaliapin died in March 2007 at the age of 98. "Right before she died she said she wanted the work to be shown at the Flinn Gallery."

In August 2007, Chaliapin's extensive art treasure was uncovered revealing the unpublished painted portraits, numerable stacked boxes of sketches, photographs, letters, telegrams, ledgers, postcards and newspaper clippings. For Fram, Baker and Richards, the task of selecting what would be in the show was overwhelming and challenging.

"What was very exciting to me was finding 17 unpublished portraits that had no identity. By the end I was able to identify 14 of them either from lists of names or from the internet. We brought on the treasure hunt and found the treasure," says Fram.

Sifting through vast amounts of information the curators found themselves in dual roles of historian and archeologist. Some clues were part of the painting like the Earl of

Halifax coat of arms in the portrait of Edward Wood; the Coral Sea backdrop identified World War II Admiral Chester Nimitz.

“A tremendous amount of research couldn’t have been done without the internet,” says Baker. “It has evolved into an enormous project.”

“We were amazed at Chaliapin’s quick, excellent technique,” says Baker. “He manages to capture the essence of the person while still working within the deadline. We were very struck by that and want people to be struck by that also.”



Fram says they found a great quote by one of the art directors about “how the cover for TIME was as important as the story inside the magazine.”

That the find yielded unidentified images made it clear that the show needed detailed wall labels. “We decided to tell who the person was and why they were considered for a TIME cover,” says Baker. “What happened to Princess Margaret in 1950 on her 18th birthday? What happened to her after? We wanted to put people in the context of the times.”

The curators have produced a 50 page brochure about the show and Chaliapin’s life. From talking to Helcia and reading the found letters, Fram said many people who Chaliapin painted became friends of the family.

“Some were accomplished artists, many were musicians, writers and politicians. It was obvious that he had an amazing sense of humor.”

Some of the people depicted in the show are presidents Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon. Baseball legend Stan Musial, New York Archbishop Francis Joseph Spellman, actress Gloria Swanson and Marguerite “Maggie” Higgins, the first female war correspondent.

Letters indicate that Chaliapin and Helcia loved to travel and party. “He had this whole world he socialized with and who they invited out to the country house. There are so many letters thanking them for their hospitality,” Fram says.

With so much interesting information it was hard to decide what would end up in the show. Early on Fram built a model of the Flinn Gallery to help her figure out how much work and information the gallery could comfortably bear.

“I didn’t want to display so much information that would be overwhelming when you walked into the space.” The show has tables with private correspondence, sketches and photos relating to the unpublished work; newspaper tearsheets of published covers on some walls; and paintings hanging in the back of the gallery.



“We are giving the viewers several opportunities here to take away one small piece or many pieces of who Chaliapin was,” Fram says.

The show runs through May 6, 2009 at which point the portraits will go to the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian in Washington, DC.

Lectures accompanying the show include one on March 28 at 2 pm when James Barber, historian and curator of the TIME Collectin at the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian, will present “Boris Chaliapin: TIME and the Smithsonian,” one by Chaliapin’s

great-niece, Dassia Posner, PhD, who has written and lectured on “The Chaliapin family Diaspora,” titled “The Life and Art of Boris Chaliapin” on April 5 at 2pm; and one on April 26 by Christopher Porterfield, Executive Editor of TIME and the book “TIME: 85 Years of Great Editing” that contains many of Chaliapin’s covers.

“Boris Chaliapin: Faces of History”

March 19 – May 6, 2009

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