

Pavel Tchelitchew

Artist Biography

The Russian-born painter and set designer Pavel Tchelitchew (1898–1957) combined abstraction and symbolism to create enigmatic, colorful compositions that interrogated perspective and ways of seeing. During his lifetime, Tchelitchew was widely considered to be among the greatest living artists, ranking alongside Picasso, Matisse, and Dalí. Born near Moscow into an aristocratic family, Tchelitchew grew up studying painting and ballet, but in 1918, during the Russian Revolution, his family fled to the Ukraine after the Soviet government confiscated their money and property. In Kiev, he studied with artists working in a Cubo-Constructivist manner and took classes at the newly opened Ukrainian State Academy of Arts. Then, living in Berlin from 1921 to 1923, Tchelitchew joined the ranks of many other Russian émigré artists and established himself as a highly successful and sought-after set designer.

Moving to Paris with his lover, the American pianist Allen Tanner, in 1923, Tchelitchew turned his attention to his canvases, leaving abstraction behind in favor of symbolic representation. In 1925, he submitted the colorful painting *Basket of Strawberries* to the Salon d'Automne, which earned him the attention of American writer and arts patron Gertrude Stein, who acquired the work for her personal collection. At Stein's literary salons, Tchelitchew met an international set of curators, dancers, writers, and artists, including writer Glenway Wescott, future director of the Museum of Modern Art Monroe Wheeler, and photographer George Platt Lynes—Americans who would accept him into their inner circle when he moved to the United States years later (and to whom he was affectionately known as “Pavlik”). His works in the late 1920s evidence formal and technical experimentation: muted color palettes reminiscent of Picasso's blue and pink periods; beige and ochre monochrome canvases; textured surfaces made using impasto, sand, and coffee grounds; the deployment of double and triple perspectives; and metamorphic forms. The content of these pieces was equally varied, with series of circus and acrobatic performers, still lifes, flowers, and portraits. In 1927, he held his first solo exhibition at Galerie Pierre in Paris and, that same year, met the English poet Edith Sitwell, who became a lifelong friend and facilitated his first solo exhibition in London, in 1928.

As his fine-arts career evolved, Tchelitchew returned to designing sets and costumes that earned him considerable praise for his avant-garde technical innovations and aesthetics, particularly for Serge Diaghilev's ballet *Ode* (1928) in Paris. In 1933, the choreographer George Balanchine commissioned Tchelitchew to design the sets and costumes for his ballet *L'Errante*, which would be the first of many collaborations between the two in Europe and the United States. Tchelitchew's international reputation grew as his work was included in the *Newer Super-Realism* (1931) exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum of Art, the first American museum exhibition dedicated to Surrealism, and thereafter began appearing in several group exhibitions in the United States. His first American solo exhibition was held in 1933 at the Julien Levy Gallery, New York, which was the first of around ten solo shows Levy would host of Tchelitchew's work. In 1932, Tchelitchew met the American writer Charles Henri Ford at a party thrown by writer Djuna Barnes, and left Tanner for Ford. Two years later, he moved to the United States to live permanently with Ford.

In the following years, Tchelitchew embarked on some of his most important and ambitious canvases, including *Phenomena* (1935–38) and *Hide and Seek* (1940–42), the latter of which was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art immediately upon its completion. These brilliantly colored, multiperspective compositions draw upon the artist's interest in mathematics and astronomy to create symbolic, metamorphic imagery governed by an inner order and logic. At the urging of Wheeler, curator James Thrall Soby organized Tchelitchew's first retrospective, at the Museum of Modern Art, in 1942. The artist continued to investigate ways of seeing and perspective in his *Interior Landscapes* series, which purported to explore the reality beneath reality. These works evoke X-ray imagery, rendering bodies transparent, thereby showing the inside and the

outside simultaneously—the visible and the invisible; the corporeal and mystical. Inspired by Einstein’s theories of the fourth dimension, these anatomically sophisticated works were said to represent “rythmical time.”

From 1952 until Tchelitchew’s death, in 1957, Tchelitchew and Ford lived and worked mainly in Italy. Upon his death, bronze casts were made of his hands and given to his sister Alexandra and Charles and Ruth Ford. His friend Parker Tyler would write the first major biography of Tchelitchew, *The Divine Comedy of Pavel Tchelitchew. A Biography* (1967), which would be followed by Lincoln Kirstein’s in 1994.