

by Lucy Gordan



## NATALIA TSARKOVA

# “There is a light inside of the Holy Father”

The Pope's official portraitist, one of *Inside the Vatican's* “Top Ten People” for 2004, recently painted her self-portrait in words on the eve of her departure for the unveiling of her painting, “Our Lady of Light,” at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City



During a private audience on June 20, 2004, Tsarkova presented the Pope with a birthday present: a nearly 4-foot wooden egg she'd painted with scenes of his life. Right, Tsarkova owes much of her fame to this Jubilee portrait of Pope John Paul II

**Y**our brochure says that you began to paint at five years old in Moscow. What media, what subjects?

NATALIA TSARKOVA: I don't remember not painting. My mother told me that even before I could walk, I drew pictures and painted, including self-portraits. At five she sent me to an artist's studio to “study” with other children. We drew animals, fairy tales, still lifes...

When I was 11, I was accepted at a prestigious art school in Moscow — the only school of its kind in the whole of the Soviet Union. We drew and drew and drew, much more than we painted. Drawing is fundamental. Eighty percent

of figurative art is drawing.

Were either of your parents artists? What about you grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters?

TSARKOVA: Maybe my mother was predisposed, but her talent was never developed. My sister Olga, who lives in Orvieto, also paints.

When I was here in December to talk to you about your successes in 2004, you told me that you were the only woman in your painting class at Moscow's Fine Arts Academy, where you studied from 1989 until you came



to live in Rome, and that your teacher Ilio Glazunov, the director of the Academy, was forced to rethink his opinion of women artists because of your talent.

**TSARKOVA:** Yes, that's true. **Glazunov** told me that he'd believed that women belonged in the kitchen and nursery and not in a painting studio until he met me. He believed that to be a great artist you had to sacrifice everything else to art. He was right.

**Was Glazunov your mentor?**

**TSARKOVA:** One of them. He taught me figurative painting. **Nicolai Kozlov** taught me drawing. They both taught me the basics and told me that I needed to learn the rest from experience.

**If you could have studied with two painters of the past, who would they be and why?**

**TSARKOVA:** **Leonardo** because he was a multifaceted genius, and **Michelangelo** because of his strength, the emotional force of his sculptures and frescoes.

**Do you have a favorite painter? Work of art? Museum?**

**TSARKOVA:** My favorite portraitist is **Velázquez** for the freedom of his brushstrokes, his colors, especially his silvers; work of art, the ceiling of the **Sistine Chapel** and **Michelangelo's Last Judgment**; museum, the **Tretyakovskaya** in Moscow. I go straight there every time I'm in Moscow. It's famous for icons and 18th-century Russian art. I lived just across (from the museum on) a narrow street. My favorite painters there are **Vassily Surikov** and **Ivan Kramskoi**. If you like, they were my teachers.

**Two of your works are in the Vatican Museums and one in the John Paul II Center in Washington, D.C.; are all the others in private collections?**

**TSARKOVA:** No, my portrait of **Cardinal Jorge Mejía** is in the Vatican Library. Now I'm working on another of **Cardinal Jean-Louis Tauran** also for the Library. Two small portraits of the Holy Father, commissioned by **Cardinal Adam Joseph Maida**, are at the headquarters of The John Paul II Founda-

tion in Detroit.

**Do you always paint oils? In the morning?**

**TSARKOVA:** Yes, and although unfortunately sometimes I have to paint in artificial light, I prefer daylight. Oils give you more freedom, possibilities to express what you want to say. Oils are also more practical, more resistant, long-lasting.

**How has your style changed over the years?**

**NATALIA TSARKOVA:** My early works are darker, have less colors, especially while I was studying in **Moscow**. Since I came to **Rome** with its brilliant sunlight, my paintings are brighter. Artists are conditioned by their environment, the atmosphere. Like **Dostoevsky**, for example. He would never have become the great **Dostoevsky**, if he hadn't lived in **St. Petersburg**.

**When and why did you come to Rome for the first time? Was this your first trip abroad? Where else have you traveled?**

**TSARKOVA:** It was 1991. I was 22 years old. I was still a student at **Moscow's Fine Arts Academy**. I won my first trip abroad. It was a reward, a prize. Before that, there was the Iron Curtain and I couldn't travel. A group of us went with **Glazunov** to **Naples, Florence, Assisi, Venice, Perugia, L'Aquila**, as well as **Rome**, all in less than 10 days. A very intense program! During this trip I saw **Pope John Paul II** for the first time. We had

an audience with him. I have a photograph of myself with him then.

I dreamed of returning to **Italy** to study, but I never expected to become the Holy Father's official portraitist. I've recently been commissioned to do a fifth official portrait of him.

**What were your first impressions of Rome?**

**TSARKOVA:** I liked the smaller cities, **Assisi, Perugia, L'Aquila**, better than **Rome**. **Rome** is much more complex. A lifetime is not long enough to understand **Rome**, a city with so many secrets to decipher.

**You have lived in Rome permanently since**





## 1994; why Rome?

**TSARKOVA:** When I came back to live in Italy, Rome got under my skin. I gradually fell in love with this Eternal City. Now as soon as I leave, I miss Rome.

## What do you like about Rome? Dislike?

**TSARKOVA:** That with every step you take, there is something beautiful to see, to discover; how ancient stones have been reused in a wall or building dating to a more modern time. The light too. Rome is beautiful in the daylight, but also at night. I hate the traffic.

## Do you miss Moscow?

**TSARKOVA:** Sometimes, especially the atmosphere, its theaters, ballets, and majestic architecture, the paintings I studied in the **Tretiakovskia**, and, of course, friends.

## Where else have you been besides Italy?

**TSARKOVA:** Spain. I don't travel much. I have too much work here; it's difficult for me to travel. As you know, I've been to **Luxembourg**, **Washington, D.C.**, and am going to **New York** for the unveiling of "**Our Lady of Light**," now scheduled for May.

## You are famous as a portraitist. Whose was the first portrait you painted? Is it more difficult to paint a woman or a man?

**TSARKOVA:** My first portrait was a water-color, a woman, but I don't remember who it was. Certainly a relative, probably one of my grandmothers or an aunt. I think men are probably more difficult to paint than women. For certain, old people are the most difficult because they've lived longer and have more experiences to portray. Portraits of old people are the hardest subject to paint because man is God's most complicated creation.

## How many sittings does a portrait require?

**TSARKOVA:** I usually go to my subjects. Before I

paint, I draw a small sketch of the composition. Then I start with white paint, black paint, and then add colors, one by one. How often I go depends on how big and how complicated the composition is, if it's just the head, bust, or if it's the whole body with a background, a setting. It took me five months to paint each of my portraits of the Holy Father, a year for my *Our Lady of Light*, and three years for *The Last Supper*.

## How did you come to Pope John Paul's attention? Why did he choose you and not someone else to paint his Jubilee portrait?

**TSARKOVA:** Through my portraits of Rome's, Italy's, Europe's nobility, through word-of-mouth. The world is small.

**Cardinal Paul Poupard**, president of the Papal Council of Culture, saw my painting, *Il Sentiero della Pace* or *The Path of Peace*, of the Holy Father walking along a rocky path in an apple orchard, at the inauguration of **Carità Politica**, an association of all the embassies to the Holy See in Viale delle Milizie near the **Vatican**. Each member state, in my case **Russia**, presented a painting.

## When did you first meet the Holy Father? Your first impressions?

**TSARKOVA:** May 8, 2000 when I presented my Jubilee portrait to him. He told me in Russian how much he liked my painting, how expressive it was, and that I should continue along this path. I was very nervous, excited; his luminosity put me at ease. There is a light inside of the Holy Father.

## What language do you usually speak to each other?

**TSARKOVA:** Italian, but sometimes Russian.

## What do you admire most about him?

**TSARKOVA:** His courage — political courage for the fall of Communism, humanitarian courage, with all his trips to reach out to the poor worldwide, and personal courage, because of his battle with Parkinson's.



Left, one of her first portraits, this painting, a kind of talisman for Tsarkova, hangs in her studio overlooking Rome's Piazza Barberini. Right, Tsarkova has painted only this one self-portrait. Bottom, her mother was Tsarkova's earliest fan.







Tsarkova is still waiting to find the right owner for her *Last Supper*, which has several bidders...

Is he the only person besides yourself that you have painted more than once?

TSARKOVA: Yes. I've painted his portrait seven times, four times where he is the central figure and three times like his face in the angel's trumpet in *Our Lady of Light*.

Even if I paint myself in the backgrounds of other paintings like *The Last Supper*, I've only painted one self-portrait which is reproduced on my brochure's cover. **Pope John Paul I's** is the only portrait I've painted after death, but I watched videos of him and listened to tapes of his voice as I painted.

Besides portraits you also paint religious works: *The Last Supper* and now *Our Lady of Light*. The Fine Art Foundation has also commissioned *Charity and Faith*. Next year you will paint *Charity* and in 2007 *Faith*. Do you have studies or sketches for these yet?

TSARKOVA: No, not yet.

Besides *Charity* and *Faith*, what are your future projects?

TSARKOVA: After I finish the portraits of **Cardinal Tauran** and of the **Grand Duchess of Luxembourg**, I have to begin one of the **Grand Duke** with his oldest son and heir, **Guillame**, and a fifth of the Holy Father.

You are a practicing Russian Orthodox; how important is your faith to your work?

TSARKOVA: What is faith? It is love. I can't paint a portrait of a person I don't like. I have to find something positive in my subject no matter what. My faith helps me to look for and emphasize the positive.

If The Fine Art Foundation or someone else commissioned you to paint a canvas of your choice, what subject would it be?

TSARKOVA: *The Last Judgement*. *Our Lady of Light* was my idea, not the Foundation's. The Foundation only stipulated that it be a religious subject and told me to choose whatever I wanted. I chose the three Madonnas.

Is there someone whose portrait you desire very much to paint? Why?

TSARKOVA: **King Juan Carlos of Spain**. **Patriarch Alexi II**. Maybe **President Bush**, who was present at the unveiling of my Jubilee portrait in **Washington**. **Carità Politica** is considering this idea as a diplomatic gesture. A Russian woman, the official portraitist of the Pope, to paint portraits of the Russian Orthodox Patriarch and of the president of the United States. I would be a bridge between peoples — an artistic diplomacy.

I regret not having painted **Mother Teresa of Calcutta** and **Sister Lucia dos Santos**. Before anyone else I predicted the content of the "third secret" of **Fatima** and painted it in the staff of the Holy Father of my Jubilee portrait.