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Naturalistic inquiries of M. Bashkirtseva as an artist: Synthesis of literature and art

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Abstract

Relevance. Maria Bashkirtseva's multifaceted approach as an artist and memoirist was significant in the formation of the French naturalism movement. Her integration of literary influences, particularly from Dostoevsky, with her artistic expression provides a unique perspective on the interaction between literature and painting in the late 19th century.

Purpose. This study aims to explore Bashkirtseva's role in developing naturalism through her artwork and diaries, emphasizing her innovative synthesis of literary and artistic elements.

Methodology. A comprehensive analysis of Bashkirtseva's paintings, diaries, and personal letters was conducted to trace her artistic evolution and literary influences. The study also examines critical receptions and scholarly works on her contribution to art and literature, alongside a detailed examination of her personal educational background.

Results. The research highlights several key periods in Bashkirtseva's career where her artistic direction significantly intersected with literary themes, particularly those of naturalism. Her work not only reflects her personal experiences and societal observations but also illustrates a deliberate blending of narrative depth with visual realism.

Conclusions. Bashkirtseva's contributions were instrumental in shaping the narrative and aesthetic dimensions of French naturalism. Her ability to infuse literary naturalism into her visual art marks her as a pivotal figure in the integration of

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these cultural domains. The study reaffirms her status as a crucial link in understanding the evolution of modern European art and literature.

Keywords: synthesis; images of children; traditions of Dostoevsky; heritage of Bastien-Lepage.

Introduction

The proposed topic is considered to be traditional among researchers of the legacy of Maria Bashkirtseva (1860-1884), an outstanding “French artist and memoirist of Russian origin” [1]. Meanwhile, it is necessary to discuss the specific use of the word “portrait,” which goes beyond the scope of the own portrait significance, and its manifestation through the interaction of pictorial and literary material in a multifaceted naturalistic context. The rapid development of this specificity got shaped through several periods of Bashkirtseva’s art. The significance of each of these periods embodied in the portraits created. The portraiture, which was highly appreciated by viewers, critics and strict to herself artist, demonstrated the re-read, developing (but not repeating) previously created things as if “filming” what had been done before in painting and literature through history. This situation stemmed from the special aspects of noble home-education that was started in her father’s Poltava estate and eventually continued in France.

According to Yu. Lotman, this type of education was preferable in Russia since the Smolny Institute focused not so much on getting the education as on isolating the Smolyan women from their families and supposedly “spoiled environment of their parents.” This segregation should have contributed to the creation of “ideal people” according to the Enlightenment educational model” [2]. However, “these philosophical visions were soon forgotten” and “Smolyan woman was shaped to be “court toys”, “maids of honour”, “tutoreses” or “dependents” [2]. Nevertheless, the society was promoting the “ladies’ fashionable behaviour” model with its inherent “institute sensitivity”, “sentimental unpreparedness for life”, “innocence”, “heightened exaltation” [2] among Smolyan women. As time went on, this behaviour provoked rejection and became the subject of irony, which is also seen in repeated entries from Maria Bashkirtseva’s diary, where she clearly prioritises her multifaceted home-education.

While describing her diary as a “literary and personal monument” [3], Bashkirtseva deemed it necessary to highlight her education as a key aspect of life and knowledge acquired from the family that was produced by respectful attitude to highly educated ancestors: “My grandfather lived at the same period as Pushkin, Lermontov, and others. He was an educated man, a poet, who worshiped Byron” [3]. Here the investment in the romantic and realistic era as a whole is conditioned upon the interest in artists of the time and historical period. It accentuates the spiritual need for such perception. It is also evident through the fact that, years later, in relatively short preface, Bashkirtseva returns to the history of her education mentioning drawing lessons as determinative events for her future destiny.

The writing style presented in deep self-assessments, original portraits of her close ones, an exquisite complexity and, at the same time a subtle vision of the specific features of a home lifestyle, reveal high educational culture of the

Russian noblewoman, whose education is complemented by a talent not only for drawing but for literature as well. Her level of education contributed to the quick assimilation of new cultural attitudes. On the one hand, according to the records made at the age of twelve to thirteen, the destruction of educational canons and patterns of behaviour occurred initially within the family. On the other hand, the family’s lifestyle changed, became more open and flexible towards European innovations.

Nevertheless, Bashkirtseva managed to remain faithful to her noble cultured roots regardless of the voiced opinions about nobility’s degeneration, about the development of a condescending and ironic attitude towards it. “And I can be accepted into the world, because I will not be a big name who came out of a tobacco shop or a dirty street. I am of noble origin, I have no need to do anything, my means allow me to do this, and, therefore, it will be even easier for me to rise” [3]. Bashkirtseva’s spiritual life was characterised by this combination of cultural traditions and innovations. It manifested itself in incorporation and mastery of literary themes in her paintings focused on developing naturalistic tendencies. They were also developed by the artist herself through her portrait work and in her diary entries-reflections (especially during her studies at the Julian Academy), where she felt herself as a prominent figure manifested both chronologically and meaningfully [4]. Another significant moment was the use of ekphrasis as a “genre” of verbal presentation of J. Bastien-Lepage’s painting “Jeanne d’Arc” and her sculpture “Mount Nausicaa”. Here, the genre/technique of ekphrasis is verbalised as a flexible aesthetic experience and reflection on her statements and reflections about the synthesis of literary and art naturalism [5].

The purpose of this study is to analyse Maria Bashkirtseva’s artistic naturalistic inquiries, which came out through her involvement in the establishment of a new art movement that includes pictorial art defined as naturalism.

The concept of naturalism in art and the history of its origin and establishment

It is a common fact that the French term “naturalism” came from pictorial art. Critic’s J.-A. Castagnari (1863) generalised observations provide such explanation: “The naturalistic school claims that art is the expression of life in all its manifestations, at all its stages, and that the only goal is to reproduce nature with maximum intensity and power: this is a truth equal to science. The naturalistic school restores the broken connection between human and nature. This school seeks to embrace all forms of the visible world when invading the life of the fields, which it depicts with the primitive force, and the life of the city, which conceals the possibility for the most magnificent victories. It had already returned their true meaning to the line and colour that became inseparable from each other. It determined the true usefulness, and, consequently, the

morality of art by placing the artist again in the centre of modern life" [6]. Here Castagnari attempts to answer the question about the origins of the natural school and define aspects of this unknown cultural phenomenon: "Where did it come from?... It is a product of our philosophy, which returned the person into the society, wherefrom the psychology had withdrawn them, and made the social life the main object of our research. It is a product of our morality that established connections between people and illuminated the problem of fate in a new way by replacing the indefinite law of love with an imperative idea of justice... It is a product of ourselves, of everything that makes us think, move, act" [7].

Castagnari's inquiry is reflected in thinking about naturalism, which accepts "all the realities of the visible world and all the ways of knowing these realities at the same time" [7]; naturalism "is... the opposite of any school. It is far from setting boundaries; he destroys all barriers. It does not violate the temperament of the artist; it gives him freedom. It does not constrain the individuality of the artist, it inspires him. It says to the artist: "Be free!" [7]. Probably, Bashkirtseva perceived Castagnari's generalisations as a basis for the artists'/writers' own naturalistic modification revealed and comprehended in the "Diary" in harmonious literary, pictorial, and cultural ways. It was the second stage of naturalistic searches expressed initially by the creation of urban pictures on the basis of the picturesque imagery of the city's literary visions. In the "Diary's" the urban sketches are presented through a synthesis of words and a visual image, which is a verbal imitation of a pictorial technique, according to which the description of cities is subordinated to the pictorial principle of text organisation. The verbal landscape of Nice, Rome, Florence, St. Petersburg, Paris includes colour, chiaroscuro, light panoramic perspective, multidimensional composition.

In her urbanistic painting, Bashkirtseva established a strong connection between the real city, which represents a perfect image, and its immanent development and transformation. At the same time, the picturesque reflection of cities intuitively emphasises those places that have acquired the status of spiritual dominants both in urban painting and in literature (the ruins of Rome, the streets of Paris, Nevsky Prospect of St. Petersburg). In the picturesque reflection of the existential and spiritual essence of the city, one can feel the desire of the artist/writer to achieve the visual effect embodied in literature. The image of Paris as a city and Maria Bashkirtseva appear in naturalistic sketches with an emphasis on detailed reflection of citizens' street life. While discovering Paris, she changes and gets the stronger sense of purpose even though "the whole look is damn feminine" [3]. Her behaviour and fashion changes: "...I love to visit booksellers and people who take me for some Breslau due to my modest look; they look at me with some special benevolence" [3]. She differentiates Paris into a foreign one and hers. On the one hand, there are "secular people, in other words, bourgeois people". On the other hand, there are "our people" that represent a creative bohemia, which includes people of different classes united by the fact that they are urbanists, a product of urban culture. According to French art critic J.-P. Crespel, their "everyday life" takes place on the streets of Paris, in cafes,

in creative workshops, at exhibitions [8]. Bashkirtseva adopted this lifestyle and became a person of urban culture. Thereby, she achieved her goal of conquering "all Paris" while being an artist who forms and professes the aesthetics of naturalism.

If in France literary naturalism revealed its potential in literature by the 1890s. (according to V. Tolmachev's definition), Bashkirtseva demonstrated not the difference between "secular people" and "our people" but the possibilities of Paris as an aesthetic entity even before the beginning of the 1880s through combining the literary naturalistic segments of J. and E. de Goncourt, E. Zola, G. de Maupassant and the artistic naturalistic segments of J. Bastien-Lepage. The combination occurred as the result of inquiries for her naturalistic manner. At the same time, the "Diary" puts a special emphasis on the work of J. Bastien-Lepage, the leading French naturalist and the creator of perfect in technique canvas "Jeanne d'Arc" (1879), which was highly appreciated by Bashkirtseva. However, the diary entry testifies: "Neither Bastien nor anyone else can teach their distinctive properties; learn only what can be learned; everything else depends on yourself" [3]. This statement reflected itself in the artist's work. Hence, the painting "The Beggar" (1881) did not remain unnoticed. It depicts a certain type of beggar, who is a dirty, tattered man in wooden shoes, armed with a club, but in search of alms. In contrast to this beggar, there is the image of a pretty girl in an elegant dress with a white collar and in an apron, who looks with surprise at a strange visitor. It is The Bastien-Lepage's motive of a pretty child accompanied by the artist's own searches, will be the one to develop in Bashkirtseva's naturalistic art. It will take a somewhat unexpected orientation towards the Dostoevsky's images of children, but still be consistent with the "image of an ideal person" discovered by M. Bakhtin later: "Here we, of course, mean not a complete and closed image of reality (type, character, temperament), but a word which is an open image. Such an ideal authoritative image, which is not observed but followed..." [9].

Probably, Bashkirtseva experienced Dostoevsky's novel as "the most influential example", since, according to M. Bakhtin, "all new prose was under his influence," including "that in the West" [9]. Bashkirtseva was close to Bakhtin's theory: "self-awareness, as an artistic dominant in the construction of the hero is already sufficient enough to decompose the monological unity of the artistic world but conditioned upon portraying a hero as self-consciousness and not describing it... But if the umbilical cord, which connects the hero with its creator, is not cut off, it is not the fictional work we observe but a personal document" [9]. In many ways Bashkirtseva has predicted and expected Bakhtin's theory in her depiction of children. Therefore, there is a controversy in V. Tolmachev's opinion that "the opposition of "flesh" to "spirit" inherent in naturalism predetermined the F. Dostoevsky's negative attitude towards naturalism and positivism". Presumably Bashkirtseva "followed" Dostoevsky's descriptive phrase "humiliated and insulted" that transformed for her into a pictorial concept of the aesthetic paradigm, embodied in a naturalistic depiction of children. After mastering the pictorial and literary French naturalistic discoveries the artist combined them with the Russian ones: according to

Dostoevsky, she interpreted them in the most fruitful period of her work in a portrait of children [10; 11].

Characteristics of the artistic legacy of Maria Bashkirtseva

The two-figure portrait “Jean and Jacques” (1883) has a special place in the artistic legacy of Maria Bashkirtseva. Nowadays it is on display in the reading room of the Newberry Scientific Library in Chicago (USA). The canvas was painted at prime of Maria Bashkirtseva’s artistic endeavour. It was a time when she was watched closely by both art lovers and the press, particularly Russian one. Bashkirtseva had the opportunity to talk to the reporter of the popular Russian newspaper *Novoye Vremya*. The conversation resulted in the article “Russian Artists in Paris. M. Bashkirtseva” (July 1883), where the painting “Jean and Jacques” was mentioned in addition to an enthusiastic story about the artist's work as a whole. After some time (November 1883), the Russian magazine “World Illustration” (No. 774) placed Bashkirtseva’s painting on the cover and named it “Jean and Jacques – children of the orphanage”. Nevertheless, despite the enormous popularity she did not experience “special joy” since, in her words, it was not enough “for my ambition”.

The artist painted this artwork in nineteen days with her characteristic dynamism but done with the rapidly improving technique, while she was mastering the innovation of both modern painting and literature. The phrase about the children of the “orphanage” as clarification for the “Jean and Jacques” title by “World Illustration” magazine brought the “rough sensuality” of the physiological portrait to it. Probably, such clarification did not satisfy the artist, who leaned towards romantic-naturalistic tendencies, which in many respects correlated with the images of Dostoevsky's “boys”, the heroes of the novel *The Karamazov Brothers*. According to G. Friedlander, “painting the tragic fate of the loving, selfless and at the same time proud Ilyusha Snegirev, showing his inherent early painful awareness of social inequality and injustice, depicting an attractive image of a fourteen-year-old “nihilist”, intelligent, seeking and energetic Kolya Krasotkin, the writer illuminates the complex and varied transformations that the psychology of the child undergoes in the retort of urban life, which is obviously “rampant”” [12; 13].

The subject of the painting “Jean and Jacques” was probably retrieved from urban Parisian life. At first glance, this is an ordinary scene without much expressiveness. Nevertheless, plein air painting mesmerises with the image of two boys walking along the sidewalk holding hands. They stopped for a moment as if something had caught their attention. The elder is serious and decisive, the younger is lazily observing the surrounding. Poses, views and the place, where everything takes place, take on the meaning of the event. This is clearly the outskirts of Paris, which Bashkirtseva loved so much due to the originality of lifestyle there. The famous researcher of Dostoevsky's portraits Galina Syritsa noted as a regularity: “Everything that happens to a person also happens to the world around them: the downfall of a person causes the downfall of the world, everything that is crooked, oblique, ugly reflected in the world around. This is a world that is ready to

collapse, perish, and at the same time rise again every minute” [14-16]. In this context, the background is drawn subtly, respectfully and colourfully. It concerns the sidewalk, the wall of the house and the ostentatious background. There is restraint in everything and at the same time harmonious consistency in the depiction of the inner world of children and the socialisation of the environment. The blue-grey scale contributes to the romanticisation of the children's world with its genuineness, freedom of movement and spontaneity. The detailed faces of children attract attention along with their hands, which are almost holding the power of the composition. The dark clothes of the children contrast with the background, which makes the children's silhouettes appear as unprotected and lonely. One can feel the contrast of children's souls and the alienness of the surrounding world, which is portrayed prominently through the children's eyes (“childish adulthood”). Probably, this is what has made the Russian press see these boys as the orphanage pupils and notice a certain correlation of the painting with Russian naturalistic prose.

And yet, in the portrait of the older boy there are details that carry a conceptually significant information. They are a scarf elegantly tied around the neck, a beret, an umbrella. As stimulus words, these details induce associative connections, revealing additional meanings of children's history, which within the boundaries of the portrait thesaurus includes possibility of belonging to the high society in the past. And then the portrait of children takes on the meaning of broken connections with the world, broken connections between people, a special children's drama, which revolves in the subtext of images and provokes reflection.

Another artist's painting “The Umbrella” is a one-figure composition, closely related to children's themes. While working the painting Maria Bashkirtseva was also able to develop her favourite urban theme of the Parisian outskirts. The painting “The Umbrella” depicts a little girl. The subject of the picture is extremely simple but full of drama, and, therefore, it excites and evokes sympathy: a poor girl with a sad look stands in the rain hiding behind a broken umbrella, while an inconspicuous cover with a fringe sits on her shoulders. This subject correlates typologically with Dostoevsky's images of disadvantaged children. It has been rightly pointed out by critics many times since Dostoevsky's images of children are “an attempt to affirm socially utopian hopes in an artistic way” [17; 18].

Bashkirtseva deepens this theme visually and gives expressiveness to this content, to the psychological characteristics of the image with naturalistic picturesqueness, which implies saturating the line and colour with their natural significance. The half-figure of a girl, her dark, poor clothes merge with a black, old, broken umbrella. Its role in the portrait space is so powerful that it seems the umbrella protects the girl from the cruelty of the world more so than from the rain. This is probably why the title of the picture does not mention the girl's face with such an adult and painful look but the spiritualised image of a rain umbrella. It creates a secluded world for the girl, beyond which she probably cannot and does not dare to take a one step, since it shelters her from the drama of life's troubles. Bashkirtseva's image of an umbrella seems to

have its life story. It seems to be from another life and gives the girl hope. The only source of warmth is something inconspicuous thrown over her shoulders, and the umbrella is the only protection from the vicissitudes of the world. They create an aesthetic integrity that accentuates the face, which impresses as a symbol of a disadvantaged child, one that has already crossed the line. This image of the girl connects with the Dostoevsky's images of children, especially with the fates recreated in "Netochka Nezvanova": "From everything Larya told me, I realised that a child, who is already developed beyond his years but in an abnormal way, developed sensually with his heart, while his mind was becoming more and more obscured by dreams, fantasies, had a deeply wounded heart and that some kind of fatalism was weighing on his poor head" [19; 20].

Bashkirtseva presented the drama of a girl's life as her dependence on the environment, circumstances and expressed in the picturesque clarity of folk life. The artist composes the subject in such a way that "allows" the external nature (an emphasised ugly face, long-suffering) to speak through the internal nature (wide-open eyes like a mirror of the soul). Hence, there is the obvious "moral" from the situation and the desire for the survival of the child as an adult. And yet, Bashkirtseva's artistic naturalism was not limited to transforming the problem of depicting the "humiliated and insulted" (according to Dostoevsky). "Tear of a child" had an alternative presented by the triptych "Three Smiles" consisting of three separate independent portraits. Nevertheless, according to the compilers of the notes of the Collected Works: "In the works of young Dostoevsky, the main socio-psychological theme of "poor people" was closely related to the image of the awakening of the personality of a woman and a child, who demand careful attention and respect for their human right from society" [21; 22]. This feature of Dostoevsky's work probably was taken into account by Bashkirtseva and refracted in her naturalistic inquiries.

The portraits from the triptych "Three Smiles" are made in equal sizes (55x46); each of them is a complete painting combined with the other two into one entity by design of Bashkirtseva, who was entranced philosophical and aesthetic reflections on the evanescence of life in all the variety of its spiritual manifestations. The artist embodied this idea in the figurative smiles of a baby, a girl and a young woman. Three female portraits of different age groups are combined with a smile as a state of being, the portraits made with the masterful technique. According to her memoirs, the artist created her triptych in her usual dynamic manner. It seems she was able to convey the emotional state of a person in three age forms in one breath [23; 24].

The person's facial expression is quite hard to translate in visual artform since any emotion on a human face does not stay visible for a long time [25; 26]. Bashkirtseva managed to capture this instant-smile and embody it in portraits. The first portrait – "The Smile of a Child" – stands out from the triptych by its light colouring. The painting is done in pink and golden tones and is filled with air, light and tenderness. The child's head is depicted frontally; a golden-haired baby observes the world with a genuine spontaneous smile. There is nothing superfluous in a portrait, in a naturalistic image everything is very easy

and simple. The background around the baby's head appears to be untouched with a brush; there is only an imprimatura of a delicate creamy-pink hue lovingly selected by the artist as an image of the pure and fresh aura of a baby. Bashkirtseva created a harmonious transition from a subtle naturalistic image of a baby's head to a monochromatic background with just a few strokes that seem to dissolve the image in a clean, carefree space as if they barely touched the canvas (baby's clothes). Thus, the artist recreated a touching portrait of a baby as the embodiment of a life dream, which never happened for her.

The next portrait is "The Smile of a Girl", which is seen as the central part of the triptych in its semantic content. It differs from the rest as the girl's head is shown in profile. She smiles, staring at the baby but still turning her back on adulthood. The outline of the child's figure almost merges with the background. The silhouette is seen as alive, moved by naturalistic-realistic techniques that combine free strokes on the canvas. The painting is done in a warm colour and with certain contrasting ratios at the same time. The girl is depicted against a dark background and painted softly and freshly as if symbolising the end of her early childhood. The artist accentuates pink, light and golden ochre tones, white reflections on the girl's cheeks and shoulders. A pink ribbon tied on the head in a small bow holds the slightly dishevelled light-blond hair, the delicate blush on the cheeks possesses expressiveness given by the corresponding colouring of the painting. As a whole it creates a state of genuine joy, freshness, purity and a happy expression on the girl's face [27; 28].

The third portrait is "Woman's Smile", which, according to M. Bashkirtseva, was painted from an image of a model and a dancer Irma Parrot. The elegant image possesses a lively nature of a young woman, her perky laughter. Unlike children's portraits, the portrait of a smiling woman is in dark, saturated colours. The strictly outlined silhouette of the figure with deep, dark, soft spots on the clothes creates a convivial and peaceful mood. The lady in black clothes, with dark hair and brown eyes depicted on a neutral background serves as the embodiment of an accomplished woman who has already seen life. Semantic contrast in the portrait is the seemingly glowing face of the model. A barely noticeable light seems to emanate from her soft features, shining on the flower that adorns the dress, and harmoniously blending into the general background of the portrait, combining the entire painting into a single hue. The gauze veil on the hat as well as the model's hair and facial details are performed masterfully. All three portraits, combined in a triptych, are painted in similar warm tones as well as children's naturalistic images in general [29; 30].

Conclusions

To conclude, the naturalistic inquiries of Maria Bashkirtseva were very fruitful and conveyed through the creation of a new artistic movement. The artist's naturalism went through several stages, each of which had a special significance. Initially, this was the home education of the noblewoman, where she developed an interest in the interaction between literature and painting. They deepened by the absorption of urbanistic European culture, especially Parisian, and enriched by the understanding of

the naturalistic tendencies of the artist J. Bastien-Lepage, French classic writers E. and J. Goncourt, E. Zola and G. de Maupassant. The artist's inquiry is presented in entries-reflections from her diary, which have an aesthetic-programmatic naturalistic meaning.

The transformation of Dostoevsky's images of children in children's portraiture played a special part. On the one hand, it is the implementation of his figurative expression the "humiliated and insulted". On the other hand, it is the alternative awakening of a child and a woman. Thus, the

artist reflected upon the movement of life in a philosophical and naturalistic sense highlighting both the vicissitudes and joys immanent for any age group.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

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Натуралістичні пошуки М. Башкирцевої як художниці: Синтез літератури та мистецтва

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Анотація

Актуальність. Багатогранний підхід Марії Башкирцевої як художниці та мемуаристки мав важливе значення для формування французького натуралістичного руху. Її інтеграція літературних впливів, зокрема Достоевського, з художнім вираженням дає унікальний погляд на взаємодію літератури та живопису наприкінці 19 століття.

Мета. Це дослідження має на меті дослідити роль Башкирцевої у розвитку натуралізму через її художні твори та щоденники, підкреслюючи її новаторський синтез літературних та мистецьких елементів.

Методологія. Було проведено комплексний аналіз картин, щоденників та особистих листів Башкирцевої, щоб простежити її мистецьку еволюцію та літературні впливи. У дослідженні також розглянуто критичні відгуки та наукові праці про її внесок у мистецтво та літературу, а також детально проаналізовано її особистий освітній досвід.

Результати. Дослідження висвітлює кілька ключових періодів у кар'єрі Башкирцевої, коли її мистецький напрям значною мірою перетинався з літературними темами, зокрема з темами натуралізму. Її роботи не лише відображають особистий досвід та соціальні спостереження, але й ілюструють свідоме поєднання глибини оповіді з візуальним реалізмом.

Висновки. Внесок Башкирцевої відіграв важливу роль у формуванні наративного та естетичного вимірів французького натуралізму. Її здатність вливати літературний натуралізм у візуальне мистецтво робить її ключовою фігурою в інтеграції цих культурних сфер. Дослідження підтверджує її статус ключової ланки в розумінні еволюції сучасного європейського мистецтва та літератури.

Ключові слова: синтез; образи дітей; традиції Достоевського; спадщина Бастьєна-Лепажя.