

# Russian to paint first lady's portrait

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El Paso artist Aleksander Titovets sits in front of a large blank canvas on Jan. 8. The Russian native has been selected as the artist to paint the official portrait of first lady Laura Bush. (Associated Press Photo by Rudy Gutierrez)

EL PASO -- Aleksander "Sasha" Titovets came to El Paso from St. Petersburg,

Russia, 15 years ago as an unknown artist with less than \$50 to his name.

Since then, Titovets has garnered respect and accolades in the art world, including being named one of the country's top 10 impressionist artists by a national arts publication in 2002.

Last fall, however, Titovets received one of the highest compliments to his work: He was commissioned by the National Portrait Gallery to paint the portrait of first lady Laura Bush that will hang in the gallery in Washington, D.C.

"At first I thought it was a joke. I couldn't believe it," the 47-year-old Titovets said, sitting casually in the living room of his west El Paso home.

For Titovets, the commission is surreal. He can't help comparing his journey to the journey French sculptor named Auguste Monferran took in the 18th century, when Catherine the Great commissioned a giant sculpture of her husband, Peter the Great. Centuries later, the sculpture titled "Copper Horseman" is one of St. Petersburg's treasures.

"This sculptor used to do miniature sculptures for the aristocracy, but Catherine asked him to do this huge sculpture, and he did it because he did not want to spoil the chance given to him," Titovets said. "That's how I feel. I am blessed somebody gave me that chance."

That "chance" was made possible after Marc Pachter, director of the National Portrait Gallery, approached El Pasoan Adair Margo, chairwoman of the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, with the idea of commissioning portraits for both President Bush and first lady Laura Bush while he is still in office.

"It was just an idea at the time, but I sent Mrs. Bush a CD with portraits by Sasha," Margo said. "The next time I was in Washington, D.C., she told me how much she liked his work. She asked me to get the ball rolling, so I arranged a visit and took him up there."

While in Washington in late October, Sasha Titovets, along with his wife, fellow artist Lyuba Titovets, met with the first lady and toured the White House with her and the White House curator. They also toured the National Portrait Gallery with one of the chief curators.

Titovets said the initial meeting with Laura Bush was important to him because he had seen her only from a distance during her visits to El Paso. While she is no doubt a beautiful woman and would be a great subject for a portrait, Titovets said, he wanted to get to know the real Laura Bush.

"I wanted to see the emotion," Titovets said. "If you think about it, I'm trying to capture her image and her words on a two-dimensional canvas. I have to find the harmony to fit that image."

Titovets' studio is on the second story of his home. He shares it with his wife, from whom he said he welcomes advice.

"Beside the physical, how do you create that emotion? An artist thinks about the harmony of color, light and dark, and all the nuances of this person," Lyuba Titovets said.

Pachter said Aleksander Titovets is the perfect artist to paint Bush's portrait.

"There's a softness in his art which I think corresponds to Mrs. Bush empathic world view. She is both elegant and accessible as a person, and his art is like that," Pachter said. "His work is constructed quite beautifully. It doesn't feel distant. It's accessible, full of emotion."

Laura Bush was not available for an interview, but a spokeswoman from her office, Sally McDonough, said the selection of an El Paso artist should not be a surprise. "It's no secret that Mrs. Bush is a big fan of El Paso," McDonough said.

Titovets is guarded about the commission. He's careful not to reveal too many details for superstitious reasons, except to say that the portrait is already in progress.

Titovets hasn't yet told his parents, who still live in St. Petersburg.

"They don't know. I think the news is too big for my mom," he said. "I think I'm going to wait until it's done."

Pachter, who will leave his job at the gallery after this week, said having two official portraits done is a more-recent trend with presidents and first ladies. One is commissioned specifically for the White House, while the other is commissioned for the National Portrait Gallery.

"In recent years, it's just gotten harder for people to get into the White House, so the National Portrait Gallery is really where more people will get to see the first lady's portrait," Pachter said.

"It's also extremely rare for a first lady's portrait to be done while her husband is still in office. But, every once in a while, the first lady finds an artist she likes and the time required to do this."

Pachter said the painting would most likely be unveiled at the National Portrait Gallery sometime in the summer. He hopes Titovets can complete the painting by May.

"I know that's quite fast, but I think he can do it. At that time, we will have a celebration of the work and the woman who inspired it, and then it will go on view in our gallery," he said.

Titovets is shy to acknowledge the obvious: that this could mean a more-lucrative career for him in the future.

"For me, money just buys me more time to paint and live a normal life," he said.

Others, however, see it as a major stepping stone for the artist.

"This is going to be such an important work, and I think people will be intrigued by the piece and by his story, too," Pachter said. "An artistic career is a combination of talent and opportunity. You could have all the talent in the world, but if opportunity doesn't come, then it's difficult. For some artists, it comes years later. But when it happens while you're in the full power of your art, that's the ideal situation."

Margo, who does not represent Titovets in her gallery, expects this commission to help to advance his career.

"It's hard to tell what will happen, but I do think it will raise his visibility significantly," Margo said. "Just in the past few years, I've seen an increase in the number of people asking me about him."

Margo said she is impressed at the speed in which Titovets has become so well-known. Lyuba Titovets is also a celebrated artist in her own right, having shown her work in several prestigious national and international exhibitions. The couple have two daughters, Anya and Mina, who were born in El Paso.

"I remember when they first arrived. Within a year of being in El Paso and by having El Pasoans support their art by buying their work, they were able to buy a house," Margo said. "Now, 15 years later, the first lady is saying how much she likes his work. That's a remarkable American story, and it's proof that the American dream is alive and well."