

INTERVIEW: SHE PAINTS THE GAME • 25 QUESTIONS FOR MARIA YUGINA - CHESS ARTIST



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25 Questions for...

By Jennifer Vallens

Chess Artist

MARIA YUGINA

When you get an idea for a painting, how do you process it from there? Do you make a sketch of the idea out and start from a drawing?

Typically, the process consists of a few successive phases. I start by imagining ideas and then I try to sketch these with a pencil. The sketch doesn't always turn out satisfactorily at the first attempt. But after having a concrete concept clear in my head, I start painting.

How long does it take you to complete a typical painting?

Usually it takes me a few days, but not always. There were some cases when, after completing a painting and not being satisfied with it, I put it aside so as to just re-paint something different after a while. Sometimes, the same canvas would "temporarily" host several successive (and completely different) paintings until it reached a final form after, say, one year.

Where is your favorite space in which to work and what are your favorite conditions to paint?

I love to paint in our big, luminous living room, with my husband working on the computer just a few meters away from me. For a perfect environment, I also need my coffee cup, music and our white cat Fortuna.

While painting what kind of music inspires you?

I'm not sure how this music is categorized, but I usually listen to such oldies as Adriano

SHE PAINTS THE GAME

Maria Yugina is a talented artist and Women's FIDE Master rated 2183 Elo. She has a vibrant personality and a passion for chess, romance and travel, which she expresses in her unique art style which she coins Colorful Cubism.

Born in 1988 in Leningrad, now St. Petersburg, she graduated from the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration. She began studying art with Vladimir Bazhenov, a member of the Russian Artists Union, being in contact with other renowned painters from St. Petersburg. One of them, Vladimir Kozhevnikov, was recently awarded the title of Merited European Artist.

Maria soon became a member of the St. Petersburg Painters' Union and over the past years has had successful showings in Romania. In addition to her classical style paintings, she has a collection of themed pieces combining her passion for art with her passion for the royal game of chess. Various chess positions are subtly and brilliantly weaved into her vividly colored paintings.

Maria is married to Romanian grandmaster Mihail Marin, three times national champion, bronze Olympic medalist in 2017 and author of many chess books and DVDs. They reside in Romania with their cat Fortuna. When she is not painting or exhibiting her work, Maria enjoys traveling and playing in chess tournaments all over Europe with her husband.

Like her paintings, Maria is full of color and spirit. She sees life as an adventure to be had. Her magnetic personality and passion for life is clearly reflected in her paintings.

I was fortunate she found some time between her many travels to answer a few questions for the readers of *American Chess Magazine*.

Celentano, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin. On my playlist I also have several versions of the Neapolitan song "Tu vuò fà L'Americano".

Speaking about Capoeira, a Brazilian martial art expert, how long did it take you to reach the green belt level?

I started practicing Capoeira by chance. I liked the ambient

music, the company and its effects on improving or maintaining my physical condition. I consider it more as an acrobatic dance than as a martial art. I was awarded the green belt after approximately two years of training.

You have done several "tango" paintings. Can you tell more about this collection and if you are a tango dancer yourself?

I have done these six tango paintings especially for a Tango festival in Vienna, but learning how to dance tango so far remains just one of my biggest dreams.

Your paintings are full of color and invoke a whimsical and playful mood. They are also full of courting and romance. Do you think the way you portray women in your art is a reflection of how you see yourself?

I believe that my perspective is a bit wider than just a reflection of myself. My aim is to portray the classical concept of beauty, both for women and men – for instance, women in dresses and with hats, men with moustaches.

Can you name a few of your personal favorite artists?

I admire painters with a wide range of styles, to name just a few: Konstantin Korovin, Claude Monet, Alfons Maria Mucha, Nikolai Ivanovich Feshen. From those whom I know personally, Vladimir Bazhenov and Vladimir Kozhevnikov.

Shifting over to chess, what has been your experience as a woman chess player?

In a wider sense, I can say that I have dedicated almost all my life to chess. My first outstanding success was a second place at the U-18 Russian Girls Championship First League when I was just 16. Soon after that I almost gave up tournament chess and became a trainer for kids. I consider that my achievements

CHESS IN ART



**Mariya
Yugina**



Maria recently showcased her art in Lund, Sweden.

as a trainer are higher than as a player, as many of my pupils won, for instance, the St. Petersburg championship at several age categories. Those familiar with chess are aware of the fact that, despite being "just" a city, St. Petersburg could always assemble a team which would be stronger than most national sides around the world. After marrying Mihail and moving to Romania, I again became more active as a player and gained the Women's FIDE master title.

How did you meet your husband Mihail Marin. Was it love at first sight?

We casually met while waiting in the queue to register for the European Rapid and

Blitz Chess Championship in Tallinn, December 2016. During the four days of the tournament we spent practically all the available time between games together. After that, we remained in continual contact, no matter if we were apart from each other or side by side. I am not sure what love at first sight really means, but probably this was it!

Speaking of the connection between chess and art, to which specific art would you relate chess?

From the visual point of view, I would first of all associate chess with painting. But if we talk about the emotional aspect, then dance looks like the best equivalent.

Do you draw inspiration from other classical paintings where chess is featured, such as in the work of Marcel Duchamp for example?

I am familiar with some classical chess paintings. I like the elegant, refined style and Marcel Duchamp does not belong to this category. I would mention Juan Pablo Salinas y Teruel as my favorite.

While most of your paintings are abstract, some of your work represents modern chess players (we see Carlsen, for example). Which chess players do you find intriguing and why?

I would gladly make portraits of any of the modern top

players as they are all interesting personalities. But I usually paint portraits to meet the specific requirements of my clients. I believe that working on portraits of Aronian and Caruana would be interesting; in particular, Grischuk's eyes would come out well after many hours of work. On the other hand, I would have problems painting Karjakin, as his facial characteristics are not defined yet. Maybe in ten years time he will become more interesting from that point of view.

It looks like there is some subtle eroticism in your works. What is it about chess or the chess world that you find so alluring?

To me chess means passion and if a man sits down to play against a woman, there is twice as much passionate and emotional tension. That's why I don't like playing against women too much.

You incorporate chess into many of your paintings. How do you go about selecting a particular chess position for each piece of art? Are the positions selected from your own games or from famous grandmaster games?

Most of my chess paintings feature positions from actual grandmaster games. After I decide upon the abstract idea and composition for a concrete painting, Mihail and I try to find a position which corresponds to the spirit of the painting. But sometimes other factors have to be taken into account. For instance, the angle and/or the visibility of the different areas of the board are essential. It can happen that we would need to have a certain area clear of pieces, because it would be covered by a player's hand, or else to avoid a congestion of pieces if a low angle requires it.

What is your preferred style of studying chess? Books? Online? Coach? Do you have any favorite books for instruction?

I have always preferred studying chess from books and I have quite a big chess library. I would recommend the books of Bronstein, Korchnoi, Geller, and, of course, Mihail Marin.

Do you make decisions based on logic or intuition? In life? In Chess? In art?

You may find my answer a bit paradoxical. In life and art I use my logic, while in chess I am rather intuitive.

How difficult is it for you to part with your artwork?

I maintain a close sentimental connection with my paintings, while working on them and a few days after that, until I get involved with another idea. Parting with them is not at all "dramatic". I am actually happy when people from all over the world like and buy my paintings and this stimulates me to keep working. Speaking of my favorite painting... I like to believe that I have not painted that one yet!

Most of your paintings I have seen express happiness,

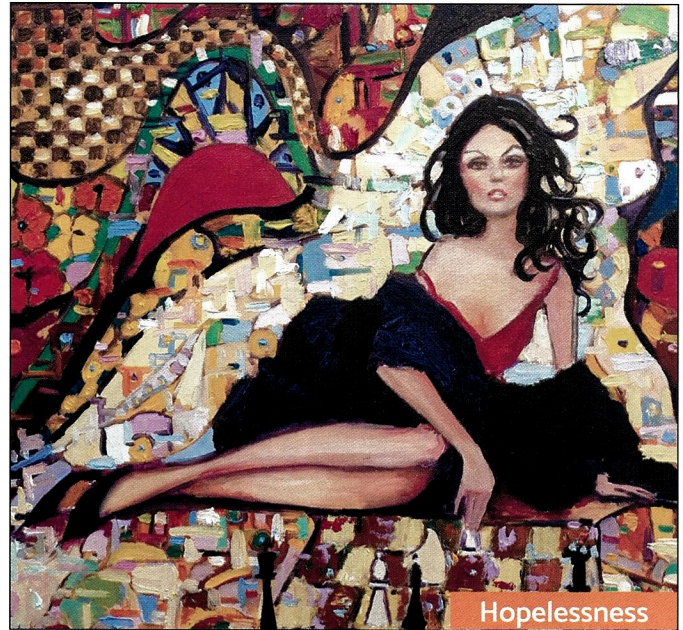
romance, mystery, excitement and play, all very joyful states. They burst with vivid color and positivity. Picasso, who pioneered the cubism style of art, had a distinct "blue" period where his paintings expressed a dark, melancholy mood through the use of monochromatic color and shading. Is your use of color and choice of joyful subject matter intentional or does it reflect your current mood? In other words, do you have a "blue period"?

I have done many paintings in a melancholic tone, but most of them were not cubistic. I have noticed that people nowadays need paintings expressing the feelings mentioned in your question. So, with very rare exceptions, my cubist paintings are intended as joyful.

I feel that I am still in the beginning of my cubist period, but I believe that it offers wide territory for experimenting, improving, developing one's personality. In a wider sense, the same applies to chess.

You do a lot of traveling for chess with your husband. Which places you still have not been to, but would like to visit?

At first thought, my answer would be – EVERYWHERE!!!



Hopelessness

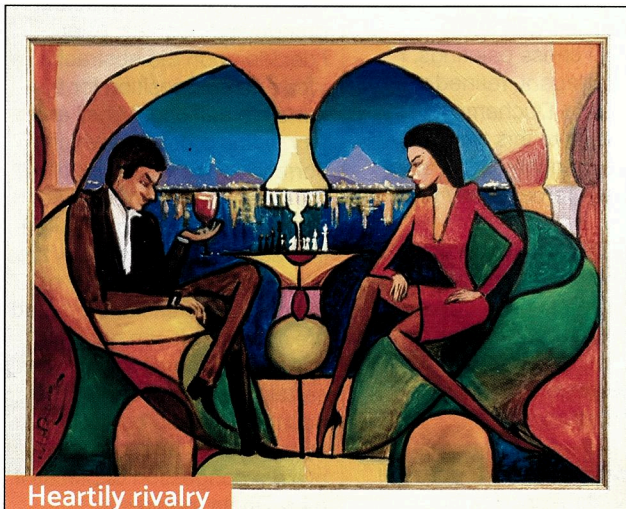
Can you select two or three of your favorite works of art and tell me what inspired you to create them.

It is not easy to choose just a few favorite paintings but I can give examples of things which inspire me when choosing a theme. "Peace before the fight" or maybe a better title would be simply "Silence" – I love long mornings, with coffee, reading, relaxed chatting, spent at my own leisure, away from the fast pace of modern life. I tried to express all that in the painting.

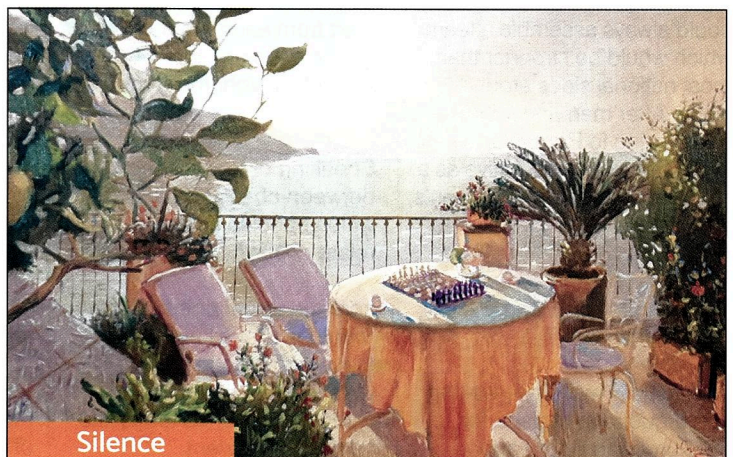
"Hopelessness" – in this painting I like the somewhat casual choice for the background, with mild light colors around the lady and more vivid and concrete 'spades' behind. When Mihail saw the lady's facial expression, he immediately indicated a hopeless chess position, from a recent game between Vallejo and Carlsen.

"Heartily rivalry" – I like the contrast between the two main themes: the obvious over-the-board tension and rivalry, and the heart frame connecting the players.

Visit www.yugina.com to see original art available for purchase. Contact: info@yugina.com



Heartily rivalry



Silence

To name just a few places: China, Argentina and other South American countries, the Philippines, Australia, or somewhere around these.

Who watches your cat Fortuna while you and Mihail are traveling?

We are fortunate to have a wonderful woman, Vera, as our neighbor. When we are away, she takes care of Fortuna, our dog Aida and our parrots.

When you get inspired during your travels, do you keep notes on what you want to include in your paintings?

I have a special folder on my mobile phone where I keep the photos suitable for use in future paintings. Sometimes I draw sketches while Mihail is driving us through Europe.

Summer, winter, spring or fall – which is your favorite?

When I used to live in Petersburg, autumn was my favorite. In my native city the fall is insanely beautiful. But now that we are traveling a lot in summer, I would point to this as my favorite period of a year.

You recently came to North America for the very first time. What are your impressions? Do you see yourself spending more time here?

I enjoyed our stay in the States, first of all because we met many friendly people. There is a general feeling of comfort and relaxation and a wide choice of interesting restaurants. Since Mihail was working as a trainer for most of the time, we did not have too much time for visiting. But I hope that one day we will get the chance to spend a month here, in order to get a better understanding of American culture and way of life.



SHE PLAYS THE GAME

By GM Mihail Marin

Two weeks after getting acquainted in Tallinn 2016, Maria and I met again for six days in Vienna. It was winter and cold outside, so we spent most of the daytime having prolonged brunches at a restaurant close to our hotel and dinners at our favorite “Zum Leupold”. Apart from getting to know each other better, we used the time for playing countless chess games. Even though the overall result favored me, most of the games were very tense throughout and I was able to appreciate the fact that my future wife (yes, I asked her to marry me right there, in Vienna), had a good understanding of a wide range of positions (even if less so in some others) good calculating skills but above all enormous ambition and optimism. At some point, Maria’s mother, to whom she frequently sent pictures of the two of us, got worried by the fact that she couldn’t see a cathedral, monument, or simply any beautiful buildings, thereby alluding to the things a tourist on vacation should be focused on. Every time we were pictured at the chessboard...



Maria with her husband, GM Mihail Marin.

Maria started out as an active chess player after moving in with me in July 2017 (we married in October in Gibraltar). For one and a half years she obtained good results, raising her rating from 2050 to 2182, becoming a Woman FIDE master with every hope of achieving the Women’s International Master title. This tendency (I hope temporarily) came to an end after Maria began to have success as a painter at the beginning of this year, leading her to dedicate most of her time and energy to her art work. This resulted in a massive drop in rating but in no way to a reduction in her enthusiasm for chess.

Speaking of Maria’s chess style, I will try to describe it from an objective viewpoint: her play may primarily be defined as optimistic and her style positionally aggressive. She will gladly embark on tactical complications, too – I actually criticize her sometimes for trying to break the natural rhythm of the game with spectacular but premature moves. She is quite strong in the middlegame, provided she is familiar with the overall pattern of play, while in the endgame she is confident, irrespective of the character of the position. She refers to the opening as a phase in which one has to survive in order to start playing for real.

The game I chose to annotate, played against a much higher-rated opponent, reflects some of Maria’s traits as a player, as well as my influence on her style.

COO

Antonio Ruperez Benito	2350
Maria Yugina	2115

Benasque Open 2019

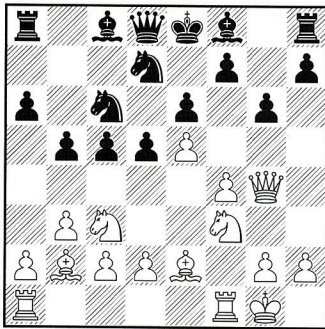
1.e4 e6 This is one of my favorite openings and, as it turned out, an ideal one for my wife. She has an excellent memory for many things, but not really for concrete opening

lines. The French is more about strategy and planning and it was easy for me to explain to Maria some of the main ideas in the typical structures. During a period of a successful one and a half years, Maria sometimes complained that she was turning into a boring player under my influence. But this never happened when she played the French, as the hidden subtleties of this opening offered her enough scope for improvisation.

2.b3 This is the line we expected and spent roughly ten minutes analyzing, while having coffee on the terrace of our Hotel Avenida. Our preparation consisted only of looking at appropriate maneuvers and a few concrete details.

2...d5 3.♘b2 ♘f6 4.e5 ♘fd7 5.♖g4 c5 6.f4 ♘c6 7.♘f3 g6 With the e5-pawn well defended White was already threatening f4-f5. Deprived of this idea, he soon finds his queen rather isolated on the kingside.

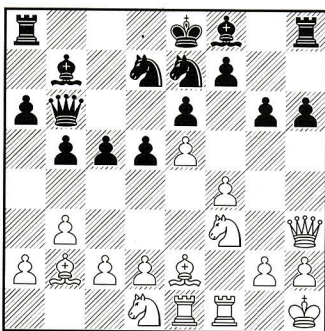
8.♗e2 a6 9.0-0 b5 10.♘c3



10...♘e7 Still following the general plan we decided upon during our preparation. Even though the pawn break is no longer a threat, it would be a pity not to utilize the f5-square for the knight.

11.♙ae1 ♗b6 12.♙h1 ♗b7 13.♘d1 h6 Black intends to maintain a flexible structure. In some of the lines we looked at there were chances of a counter-attack with ...g6-g5. Personally, I would prefer the more resolute 13...h5 when, for example, after 14.♗h3 threatening g2-g4, Black can continue 14...♗h6 15.♘g5 ♘f5, followed by either ...♘b8-c6 or ...d5-d4 and ...♗xg5, endangering the pawn on e5.

14.♗h3



14...♗g7 Having played the Accelerated

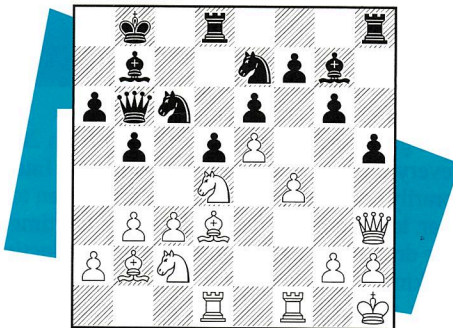
Dragon for many years, Maria has a tendency to develop her bishop this way also in the French. In this case, the main idea is to defend the rook so as to avoid ♘g5. As we will see, the passivity of this bishop will only be temporary.

But 14...0-0-0 was entirely possible as after 15.♘g5 hxg5! 16.♗xh8 ♘f5 Black has excellent compensation for the exchange. The immediate threat is ...♗g7 followed by ...gxf4, undermining e5, and if 17.♗g8 ♗g7 18.♗xf7 d4 White has two passive minor pieces and an exposed queen. For instance, 19.♗xg6? runs into 19...♗xg2+! 20.♙xg2? ♘h4+ winning the queen.

15.d4 ♘b8 This is just another regrouping planned during our morning preparation, aiming at a speedy control of d4 with both knights, although for this purpose the bishop would be better placed on f8 in order to defend the a3-f8 diagonal.

16.♘e3 White could gain some time over the game continuation with 16.dxc5 ♗xc5 17.♗d3 ♘bc6.

16...♘bc6 17.♙d1 cxd4 18.♘xd4 h5 19.♗d3 0-0-0 20.c3 ♙b8 21.♘ec2



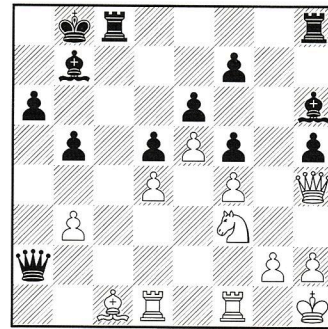
21...♙c8 White has consolidated his control over d4, but due to the concrete circumstances of the chosen opening line, c3 remains a weakness on the semi-open file.

22.♘f3?! Offering Black the necessary tempo to commence counterplay. More active would have been 22.♗a3 or 22.a4.

22...♗h6! Even with the loss of two tempi (...h7-h6 and ...♗g7) this regrouping is still effective.

23.♗h4 ♘f5 24.♗xf5 gxf5 25.♗c1 It may seem that White has regrouped properly, but his queenside weaknesses will tell.

25...♗a5! 26.♘cd4 ♘xd4 27.cxd4 ♗xa2

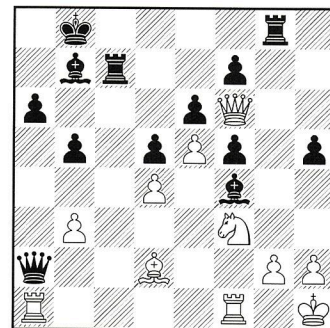


28.♗e7? This only helps Black to set a trap for the queen. True, the position still looks dangerous for White after 28.♗xh5 ♗xf4 29.♗xf7 ♗cg8 30.♗d2 ♗c2!, preparing to introduce the queen into the attack via e4. Then, after 31.h3 (31.♗xe6? allows the spectacular 31...♗xh2 32.♘xh2 ♗e4 33.♙f3 ♗e2 winning.) 31...♗g3 32.♙c1, Black can at the very least continue 32...♗gxh3+ 33.gxh3 ♙xh3+ with a draw.

28...♙c7 29.♗f6 ♗g8 30.♗d2 Planning a quick ♗a5, with adequate compensation for the pawn. 30.♗g1 is more passive, for example 30...♗g7 31.♗g5 ♗xb3 results in a clearly better position for Black.

30...♗xf4! With only few minutes remaining on the clock for the rest of the game, Maria envisioned this as a drawing combination. With a little more available time, she might have spotted the win.

31.♙a1



31...♗b2 Now and on the following moves Black could have played 31...♗xd2! 32.♘xd2 ♗g5, winning back the queen and remaining with two healthy extra pawns.

32.♙ab1 ♗a2 33.♙a1 ♗b2 34.♙ab1 Draw.