

The Golden Antelope

LEV ATAMANOV

1954

As one of Atamanov's greatest works, *The Golden Antelope* is an intricate retelling of a classic Indian fairytale. The story follows a greedy rajah in search of infinite wealth and a young poor boy with a kind heart. Both meet a magic antelope able to create gold from the sparks of its hoofs. Sharp laconic dialogue, expressive characters, and exquisite Indian backdrops make this film stand out among Atamanov's series of classic fairytales.

Leonid Shvartsman, one of the greatest Soviet animators, was the production designer for the film and designed all the characters, except for the golden antelope herself. The antelope was drawn by Natalya Stroganova, a student of the renowned animal painter Vasily Vatagin. According to Shvartsman, the most difficult for him was the image of the rajah. He remembers sitting for a long time in the Lenin Library, flipping through album after album from India, shovelling through books about Sikhs and not finding the image. All until the team came across a photo of a real rajah, which immediately felt like the right fit. Shvartsman sketched it and then built an image on this sketch. His assistant, guards, a tiger, the main character is a boy, they all came to the screen from these albums of the Lenin library.

This brings up an interesting element of Soviet animation. Many Soyuzmultfilm most beloved films were based on folklore from different countries: 'The Snow Queen' and 'The Enchanted Boy' are based on Hans Christian Andersen's tales, 'The Bremen Town Musicians' were based on Brothers Grimm tales, 'Adventures of Mowgli' based on Rudyard Kipling's 'The Jungle Book' and set in India and so on. However, Soviet animators were rarely allowed to leave the country to do any character studies or background research, thus they relied primarily on the materials available at the Lenin Library in Moscow. The many beloved Soviet animation characters were all, indeed, based on the limited materials which made it through censorship. For some films, the animators were allowed to do some research, but in a location within the Soviet bounds. For example, *The Snow Queen's* Nordic backdrops are based on Tallinn, Estonia.

'The Golden Antelope' like Atamanov's other 1950s animations ('The Snow Queen', "The Scarlet Flower") was drawn using the

"rotoscoping" technique from the voice actors (in Soviet animation this method was called "éclair" - after the brand of the manufacturer of the long table on which all manipulations were carried out). The actors would be filmed as if in a live performance with makeup and costume. Then the film footage was transferred to celluloid and into frame-by-frame drawings. In the case of 'The Golden Antelope', the raja was played by Ruben Simonov, a Soviet-Armenian actor and director. His voice and mannerisms helped the character of raja come to life. Shvartsman remembers that Simonov would put on a turban, a robe, and walked, bent over, his hands behind his back, just like his character on the screen. Simonov brought a lot to this role - a characteristic gait, gestures, intonation. Rajah would have been very different without him.

'The Golden Antelope' had a prototype. At the beginning of the 17th century, the Mughal Empire, which was located on the territory of modern India and Pakistan, was ruled by the prince Jahangir. Once, while hunting, he caught an unusually large male Indian gazelle - chinkara. The emperor felt sorry to kill the beautiful animal, he settled it in the palace and named it Mansraj, "Lord of the Antelopes." Jahangir ordered to cover the hooves of his pet with pure gold. They sparkled so much in the sun that it seemed as if gold coins were flying from under Mansraj's feet. Rumours about this quickly spread among the people and soon turned into a fairy tale. And when the antelope died, Jahangir built a magnificent mausoleum in his honour.

Going back to the film, the story itself has a strong moral footing. It is not hard to guess that greed is what brings the raja down as he drowns in the infinite gold the antelope provides. Whereas the young boy thrives because he selflessly saves the antelope not asking for any gold in return. This message, undoubtedly, did well with the Soviet censorship committee. What is more Soviet and anti-capitalist than a rich person drowning in his own gold on the marble steps of his castle as the poor boy sticks to his principles, does not give up on a friend, and, ultimately, comes out a winner? Arguably, the moral of the story is still very universal: the wealthy have a tendency to find the golden antelope and keep it imprisoned thus becoming even wealthier. However, the gold the infinite gold has a tendency to pile up and, unavoidably, bury its owners.