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PRESS RELEASE

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FROM VIVIEN LEIGH, RITA HAYWORTH & JOAN CRAWFORD TO ERROL FLYNN & SPENCER TRACY

Artist Boris Smirnoff's first-hand portraits of screen icons head to auction



The avant-garde artist Boris Smirnoff creating the portrait of Hollywood icon Errol Flynn that is being offered at auction
©The Vineyard Hotel, Berkshire

LONDON, UK. MARCH 2026. Twenty artworks by the French-Russian artist Boris Smirnoff (1903–2007), who captured some of the most iconic faces of cinema and theatre's Golden Age, as well as prominent figures from the early 20th century, are being offered in an online auction **at Olympia Auctions until March 22, 2026**. The 20 works on offer include firsthand depictions of legendary stars such as **Vivien Leigh, Joan Crawford, Leslie Howard, Errol Flynn, Spencer Tracy, Rita Hayworth and Ava Gardner,**

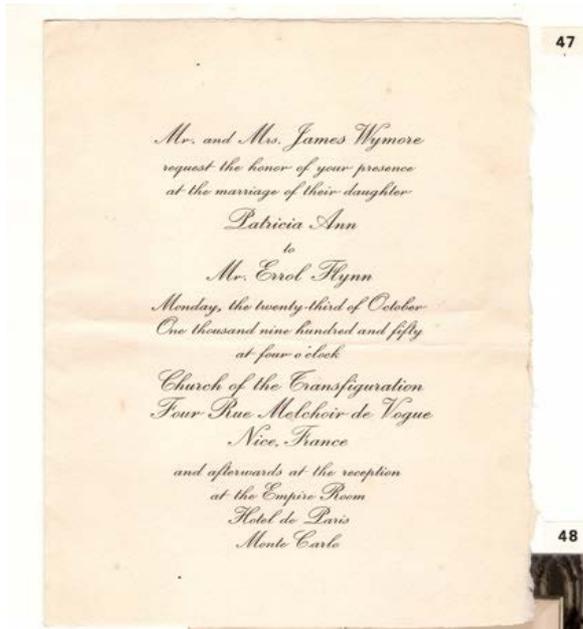
who Smirnoff befriended, or came into contact with during his established career as a figurative painter and member of the avantgarde in the south of France.



**Telegram from Errol Flynn to Smirnoff inviting him onto his boat.
Flynn was just one of the glittering stars among the artist's friends circle
©The Vineyard Hotel, Berkshire**

Produced during a period when cinema was shaping global celebrity culture, the works in the sale offer a rare visual record of the personalities who dominated the stage and screen in the 1930s. More than a star-studded portrait series, the works also reflect Smirnoff's own remarkable journey. After fleeing revolutionary Russia and rebuilding his life in France, he moved within Europe's cultural and celebrity elite. Through his paintings, modern audiences are granted an intimate window into that glittering world, captured by an artist who lived among it. Arriving in France in 1927 where his family had fled the political unrest of Russia, Smirnoff's next decade proved to be highly productive. He created a large body of work in oils and pastels, developing a distinctive style that combined modernist ideas with a refined sensitivity for portraiture.

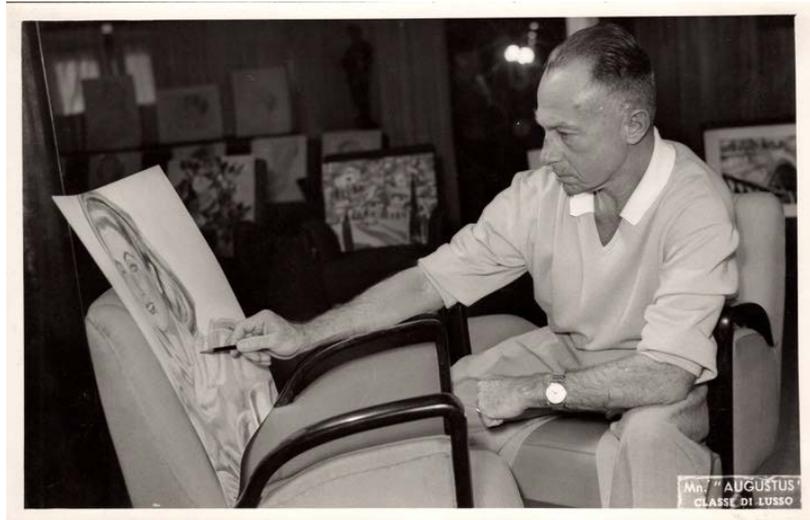
He also spent time in the south of France, in particular the village of Haut-de-Cagnes near Cannes, where he became a well known and colourful local personality. His lifestyle was bohemian, with him existing on bartering with local restaurants and shops, exchanging paintings for meals and supplies. Every year he would then embark on long cruises, buying the cheapest ticket and setting up his easel in the first-class area of the ship, where he would sketch fellow passengers and attract new patrons. Many of his admirers became subjects of his works. Among them were the Hollywood film stars Errol Flynn (1909-1959) and Rita Hayworth (1918-1987).



A wedding invitation to Smirnoff from his great friend, the Hollywood actor Errol Flynn and the artist photographed with one of his completed portraits in his studio
©The Vineyard Hotel, Berkshire

Dubbed the “Love Goddess” by *Life Magazine*, **Rita Hayworth** was an American actress, dancer and celebrated pin-up star who was one of Hollywood’s most glamorous figures. She began her career performing in her parents’ nightclub in New York, where her talent quickly attracted the attention of a Hollywood producer. Hayworth later gained widespread recognition for her roles in *Gilda* (1946) and *The Lady from Shanghai* (1947).

Errol Flynn was an Australian-American actor celebrated for his swashbuckling roles in classic adventure films. He rose to prominence in Hollywood during the 1930s, becoming known for his charismatic screen presence and heroic characters. Flynn achieved lasting fame through performances in *Captain Blood* (1935), *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938) and *The Sea Hawk* (1940).



The artist Boris Smirnov in his studio putting the finishing touches to his portrait of the actress Grace Kelly
©The Vineyard Hotel, Berkshire

Flynn and Smirnov became good friends and at one point he sent Smirnov a telegram inviting him aboard his yacht (a photograph of the telegram still exists as well as a photograph of them together). Portraits of both Hayworth and Flynn are included in the sale; a pencil and pastel sketch of Hayworth carries an estimate of £100-£150 (lot 626) and a coloured pencil sketch of Errol Flynn is estimated to fetch £80-£120 (lot 627).



Boris Smirnov's portrait of his great friend, the Hollywood actor Errol Flynn, £80-£120 (lot 627)
©Olympia Auctions

Among the other works is a portrait of **Vivien Leigh**, the celebrated actress whose performance in *Gone with the Wind* made her one of the defining stars of her generation. Smirnov captures her in

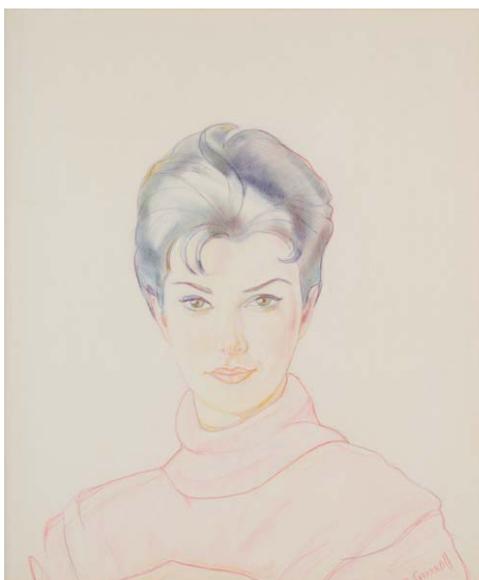
pencil and pastel, with elegance and composure, emphasising the luminous features that made her such an enduring screen icon (estimate £100-£150 lot 624).



Boris Smirnoff's portrait of Vivien Leigh, estimate £100-£150 lot 624
©Olympia Auctions

Also included is a portrait of **Leslie Howard (1893–1943)**, one of Britain's most popular film stars of the 1930s and a major box-office draw of his time. He worked in both Britain and Hollywood, earning academy award nominations for 'best actor' for his performances in *Berkeley Square* (1933) and *Pygmalion* (1938). Many audiences remember him best for playing Ashley Wilkes in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Over the course of his career, he appeared in several notable films, including *Of Human Bondage* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* in 1934, *The Petrified Forest* (1936), *Intermezzo* (1939), *Pimpernel Smith* (1941) and *The First of the Few* (1942). The estimate for this work in blue pencil is £80–£120 (Lot 629).

A charming portrait of Hollywood superstar **Ava Gardner (1922–1990)** captures her in pencil and pastel on paper. Rising to stardom from rural North Carolina, she became known for her striking screen presence and memorable performances. She is best remembered for her role as the seductive Kitty Collins in *The Killers* (1946), as former showgirl Eloise Kelly opposite Clark Gable in *Mogambo* (1953), a performance that earned her an Academy Award nomination, and as Maxine Faulk alongside Richard Burton in *The Night of the Iguana* (1964). The work carries an estimate of £60–£80 (Lot 623).



Boris Smirnoff's portrait of Hollywood superstar Ava Gardner £60–£80 (Lot 623)

©Olympia Auctions

The character of another leading lady, **Joan Crawford (1904–1908)** is cleverly caught in pencil, pastel and watercolour on paper. Joan Crawford (1904–1977) was an American actress whose career stretched from the silent films of the Jazz Age to the major studio dramas of Hollywood's Golden Age, making her one of MGM's most prominent stars. She began her career as a dancer in New York nightclubs before moving into silent films, where her talent and determination quickly brought her wider recognition.

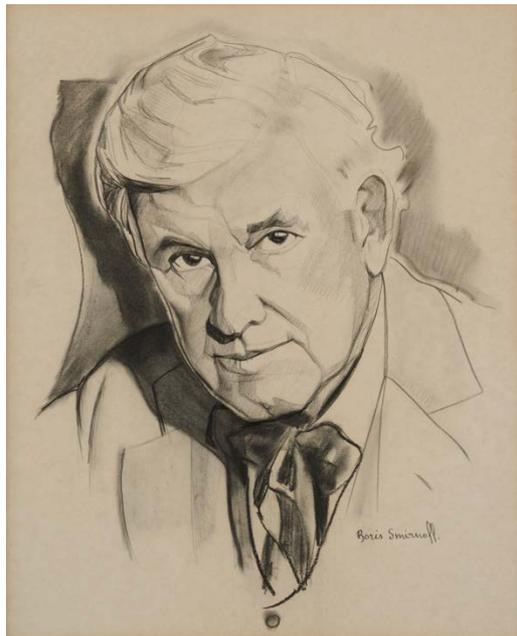
Over time she took on increasingly dramatic and psychologically complex roles, most notably in the melodrama *Mildred Pierce* (1945), for which she won the Academy Award for Best Actress. She is also remembered for powerful later performances in films such as *Sudden Fear* (1952) and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* (1962). Her portrait carries an estimate of £100-£150 (lot 625).



Boris Smirnoff's portrait of the film star Joan Crawford, estimate £100-£150 (lot 625)

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Spencer Tracy (1900–1967) is remembered as one of the most respected and accomplished actors of Hollywood's Golden Age. Known for his natural, deeply human performances, Tracy built a career that continues to influence actors and filmmakers today. In 1935, Tracy joined Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, the most prestigious studio in Hollywood at the time. His career quickly gained momentum, particularly after his 5th MGM film, *Fury* (1936), which helped establish him as one of the industry's leading dramatic actors. Tracy's talent earned him back-to-back Academy Awards for 'best actor' for his performances in *Captains Courageous* (1937) and *Boys Town* (1938), a rare achievement that highlighted his extraordinary range and authenticity on screen.



Boris Smirnoff's portrait of screen actor Spencer Tracy, estimate of £60-80 (lot 628)
©Olympia Auctions

Over the course of his career, Tracy appeared in a number of enduring classics, including *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967), a powerful film that remains one of the most memorable works of his legacy. Through performances marked by honesty, warmth and emotional depth, Spencer Tracy secured his place as one of the most admired actors in film history. He has been encapsulated in pencil and charcoal, with the work carrying an estimate of £60-80 (lot 628).

Commenting, Head of Olympia Auctions Paintings & Works on Paper department, Adrian Biddell, said: "What makes this group so compelling is that it sits at the intersection of art history and cultural history. Smirnoff was not simply depicting famous faces from afar, he was moving within the same social circles, meeting actors, writers and public figures during a period when cinema was beginning to shape modern celebrity. These portraits feel immediate and personal, often made quickly in pencil

or pastel, yet they capture something unmistakable about the sitter. They also reflect Smirnoff's own extraordinary life story, from revolutionary Russia to the cafés and studios of France and the glamorous circles of the Côte d'Azur. Taken together, the works offer a fascinating glimpse into the world of film and theatre's Golden Age, seen through the eyes of an artist who translated that world onto paper in a truly unique way."



A framed portrait of actress Rita Hayworth by artist Boris Smirnoff, estimate of £60-80 (lot 628)
©Olympia Auctions

Aside from film and TV stars, Smirnoff's circle also widened to include major cultural figures, such as Winston Churchill, who he sketched when Churchill was visiting the Côte d'Azur. Today his works are represented in museum collections in Haut-de-Cagnes, Grenoble, Moscow and Prague.

All of the Smirnoff works in this sale come from the celebrated Vineyard Hotel in Newbury, Berkshire, where they formed part of the hotel's notable art collection for many years.

About Smirnoff

Boris Smirnoff was born in Kharkov in Tsarist Russia, now Kharkiv in Ukraine, into a middle-class family of French aristocratic émigrés with strong artistic interests. He studied art in Petrograd, today St Petersburg and as a young man worked at the celebrated avant garde Meyerhold Theatre in Moscow, an important centre of experimental performance and visual culture in the years before the Russian Revolution.

The upheaval of the October Revolution in 1917 forced his family to leave Russia for France, while Smirnoff initially remained behind in Petrograd, continuing to develop his artistic practice. Eventually he too left the country, travelling through Japan and the East before arriving in Paris in the early 1920s. There he enrolled at the École des Beaux Arts and studied under the painter Lucien Simon. During this period he also encountered and greatly admired the work of the Japanese artist Tsuguharu Foujita. Foujita's influence can be seen in the clarity of line, balanced compositions and soft pastel palette that characterise many of Smirnoff's paintings and works on paper.



Boris Smirnoff's portrait of Leslie Howard, estimate £80–£120 (Lot 629)
©Olympia Auctions

Much of the artist's early work was lost during World War II, when German occupying forces destroyed paintings they classified as "degenerate art". The experience deeply affected him. Afterwards Smirnoff increasingly turned to watercolour on paper, valuing the freedom and security it offered, once remarking that he preferred the medium because he could always place the works in a suitcase and carry them away with him.

~ENDS~

NOTES TO EDITORS

Bidding is open now until March 22, 2026 via Olympia Auctions – link here:

<https://olympiamed.olympiaauctions.com/auctions/8880/olympi10032>

The works are on Preview until Tuesday 17th March, and Wednesday 18th - Friday 20th March, by appointment. Public contact: pictures@olympiaauctions.com and [+44 \(0\)20 7806 5541](tel:+44202078065541)

Hi res images can be downloaded from here (copyright is Olympia Auctions for the portraits and for the archive images ©The Vineyard Hotel, Berkshire):

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1YUMV73kFb53ZOZ8mofs4w7OJQPrRDwD8?usp=share_link

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