

Fine Art Connoisseur™

THE PREMIER MAGAZINE FOR IMPORTANT COLLECTORS



IN THIS ISSUE:
Why Is Russian
Art Hot?

FEBRUARY 2006

\$5.95 U.S. | \$7.95 CAN.
Volume 3, Issue 2

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R U S S I A

Why Is Russian Art Hot?

Our Publisher Travels To Moscow To Find Out

By B. ERIC RHOADS

ASK ANYONE IN THE ART WORLD, and you'll hear that Russian art is very hot. Auction houses report record sale prices, and galleries selling Russian art can't seem to keep it in stock. According to *Financial Times* writer Jackie Wulschlager, "Russian art is everywhere this season. Brussels is showing 20th-century masterpieces; Russian Impressionism tours Spain; works from Byzantine triptychs to Malevich line the New York Guggenheim's spiral ramp in the overview *Russia!* This is unprecedented in the modern age: not since Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in pre-war Paris have the splendour and triumphant difference of Russian art hit the West so exuberantly. It has come to conquer, to announce a new cultural confidence that is now developing in Moscow and St. Petersburg...."

When I inquired why Russian art is so much in demand, Lazare Gallery owner John Wurdeman, who specializes in selling Moscow School Russian artists, invited me to find out firsthand by accompanying him on a 10-day art-buying trip to Russia. I took him up on his offer, and by the time I returned from Moscow, I had a new appreciation for Russian art, Russian artists, and all those who make it possible for us to see this art today.

GETTING PAST THE GATEKEEPERS

Right away, Wurdeman emphasized how difficult it is to buy art in Russia, but how difficult could it be? I learned that in Russia, the top artists hold celebrity status and are therefore hard to reach. Without trusted introductions and references, these "national treasures" wouldn't give you the time of day, even if you are a wealthy, established dealer. Few have been able to penetrate this highly protected system, but Wurdeman has a special "in." His son Jonathan graduated from the famed



PUBLISHER B. ERIC RHOADS IN RED SQUARE





MORNING FOG
Mikhail KUGACH
2003, OIL ON PANEL, 10 1/2 X 16 3/4 IN.



LAZARE GALLERY OWNER JOHN WURDEMAN AND HIS SON JONATHAN, ACTING AS TRANSLATOR, VISITING WITH ILYA YATSENKO, YURI KUGACH, AND IVAN KUGACH



GIRL IN FUR COAT
 IVAN KUGACH
 1995, OIL ON CANVAS, 18 1/2 x 13 3/8 IN.

Surikov Art Institute in Moscow, and maintains ties with many notable artists and instructors.

Even though the Wurdemans have established trusted bonds with many Russian artists, they must still deal with the challenge of getting the art they buy out of the country. Recognizing the need to keep at least some great works of art in national collections, Russia's Ministry of Culture requires all paintings, new or old, to be documented and approved for removal before they can leave the country. This bureaucratic red tape can take months, even years, to traverse, which discourages trade with the outside world. Accustomed to the process, however, the Wurdemans built in extra time at the end of our journey for documenting the 287 pieces they purchased.

VISITING ONE OF RUSSIA'S GREATS

Despite some resistance, Jonathan's connections opened many doors for us in and around Moscow. We charted several days of meetings with artists and their families that often began at 5 a.m. and didn't end until 2 a.m. In order to get acquainted, Russians expect guests to dine

SELF-PORTRAIT
 YURI KUGACH
 1958, OIL ON CANVAS MOUNTED ON PANEL, 31 1/4 x 22 IN.





JUNE GREEN
YURI KUGACH
1999, OIL ON PANEL, 20 X 27 1/2 IN.



YURI KUGACH'S DACHA-STUDIO



OLD ESTATE (ACADEMIC DACHA)
ALEXANDER KOSNICHEV
2004, OIL ON CANVAS, 27 x 37 IN.



AS STANISLAV BRUSILOV'S PAINTING DEMONSTRATES, THE ACADEMIC DACHA IS ONE OF THE MOST FREQUENTLY PAINTED BUILDINGS IN RUSSIA.

BELOW: THE SURIKOV INSTITUTE'S ACADEMIC DACHA



with them and sit up late talking. It was a grueling schedule, but well worth the exhaustion.

On our first rainy morning, I met up with the two Wurdemans, Russian artist Ilya Yatsenko, and Surikov Institute master Nikolai Dubavik for a five-hour road trip through the countryside. The Wurdemans were taking us to meet one of Russia's oldest living master artists, Yuri Kugach. He is one of the greats whose work hangs in all of the major museums and is represented in most books on Russian Impressionism. Kugach's family is to Russian art what the Wyeths are to American art. His late wife Olga Svetlechnaya (1915-1997), son Mikhail Kugach, and grandson Ivan Kugach are all world-renowned artists. When we finally reached our destination, it took several hours of bonding with Mikhail before he would allow us to meet with his 90-year-old father. Finally, we were invited into the master's studio, a humble (and chilly!) *dacha* in the midst of an apple orchard. Here, Yuri paints on location almost every day, even during the harsh winters.

I expected a frail old man, but Yuri Kugach is strong and vibrant. We chatted about art and about some of the shows Wurdeman had arranged featuring his works in America. He



AUTUMN DAY
ANDRE SMIRNOV
2005, OIL ON CANVAS, 15 3/4 X 23 5/8 IN.

then allowed us to look through hundreds of paintings and sketches that he had never shown anyone other than his family, some of which he had decided to sell to Wurdeman due to their close relationship. Some were recent, while others dated as far back as the 1930s. In every case, he was able to cite the painting's location and year, describe the day, and recall what was on his mind when he painted it. Referring to one painting, he said, "I've been working on this painting on and off for more than 70 years. I finally got it right." After a few memorable hours, we said our goodbyes and moved on.

SEEING THE ARTISTS' LIFESTYLE

During the next few days, we were treated to an insider's look at the artists' life, past and present. First, we visited the academic *dacha*, a place where Surikov Institute graduates live and paint in the summer months. Originally a country house used by Catherine the Great, this revered and breathtaking lakeside home has been a painting site for virtually every important Russian artist in the past 250 years. After viewing the *dacha*, grounds, and private museum, we spent the night in student housing and departed the following morning.

AN ENTIRE ROOM AT THE REPIN INSTITUTE FILLED WITH STUDENT COPIES



THE REPIN INSTITUTE, ST. PETERSBURG





A. Kosnichenov © 2005

WINTER QUAY
 ALEXANDER KOSNICHEV
 2005, OIL ON CANVAS, 15 3/4 x 23 5/8 IN.

The balance of our trip was spent in Moscow, visiting the widows and families of some of Russia's late masters — Alexander Fomkin, Nikolai Sergeyev, Vyacheslav Zabelin, Alexander Danilichev, Nikita Fedosov, and Poiter Maltsev — as well as several of Moscow's top living painters. These included Nikolai Dubavik, Alexy Sukhovetskaya, Nikolai Kozlov, Yuri Greshenko, Igor Raevich, Andre Smirnov, Alexander Kosnichenov, Ilya Yatsenko, Ivan Zolotuhin, Alexey Nikolaivich, Olga Belakovskaya, Stanislav Brusilov, Tsvetlana Smirnova, and Gennedy Pasko.

With the exception of two of the artists we visited, each of these prominent artists has been awarded a large studio space in one of the 11 multi-story buildings owned by the Union of Russian Artists. The union was founded in the early 20th century to aid the development of great artists. Member-artists contribute a number of works that are then sold, and the proceeds are used collectively to provide services. Some of the studios are nicer than others, so through a natural pecking order, the best-located studios are given to the most revered artists, like Kugach.

CREDITING THE ACADEMIES

My interviews with the top artists in Moscow pointed to one undeniable conclusion: Russian art is so hot be-

cause today's collectors have rediscovered Realism, and Russian artists have had access to the very finest realistic training since the 18th century. Since the days of Catherine the Great, Russian artists have been taught precise skills, resulting in painting excellence. These skills, and the best methods for teaching them, were adopted from even earlier academic practices established in Italy and France. Somehow, despite more than two centuries of internal and external turmoil, the country's academic system has survived intact.

Two schools exist in the Russian academic system: The Repin State Academic Institute of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in St. Petersburg, which leans toward tight, realistic painting disciplines, and the Surikov Moscow State Academic Institute of Art, which leans toward representational impressionism. The vast majority of Russian art currently on the market has been created by graduates of these two schools.

Artistic training can begin at a very young age in Russia. Students showing a strong aptitude for art are admitted into a full-time preparatory program as early as age 7. While visiting the preparatory school, I stumbled into a class of 7-year-olds painting still lifes. When they reach the fourth grade, these students will begin drawing nudes from



Still Life With Flowers
Tsvetlana Smirnova
2005, Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 1/4 in.



VILLAGE MOTIF
TSVELANA SMIRNOVA
2000, OIL ON PANEL, 11 3/4 x 16 5/8 IN.

ILYA VACHESLAVOVICH YATSENKO IN HIS STUDIO



TSVELANA SMIRNOVA SHOWING
OFF A NEWLY COMPLETED STILL LIFE





VIEW FROM BELL TOWER (VILNI USTUG)

NIKOLAI DUBAVIK

2004, OIL ON CANVAS, 22 1/2 X 35 1/2 IN.

life, and by the 12th grade, they will be able to execute drawings with perfect draftsmanship and likeness. By the time students graduate the preparatory school at age 19, they are prepared to enter the world as fine artists, with skills rivaling most professionals elsewhere. However, to be part of the true Russian heritage, studies must continue at one of the two academies.

Once they pass the intensive entrance exam and are approved by master instructors, academy students choose a special area of emphasis to study: sculpture, painting, architecture, or monumental works (mosaic and fresco). Students spend the first three years studying anatomy (and other disciplines), with the first full year concentrated on drawing the head. Drawing instruction begins with copying other drawings, then drawing from plaster casts, and finally drawing from live models. The curriculum continues with on-location copies at museums, and significant amounts of work done from life. In the sixth and final year, students create one giant painting or sculpture as their final exam. To graduate, students must defend their works before a board of masters. If a piece does not pass, the student must repeat the year.

Art, artists, and the academic system have received financial support from the Russian government for nearly 250 years, but things have changed dramatically since the end of communism in 1991. Russia's current government can't provide the funding it once did, and both the economy and the bureaucracy surrounding the sale of artwork make it difficult for artists to earn a living.

NIKOLAI ANATOLYEVICH





WINDY DAY
 STANISLAV BRUSILOV
 2005, OIL ON CANVAS, 11^{3/4} X 23^{3/4} IN.

Compounding the problem is the current Minister of Culture Mikhail Shvydkoy's promotion of Modernism, and the state museums' favoritism of more contemporary styles. Many believe that Russia's classical, academic standards of Realism are in jeopardy.

CARRYING THE TORCH

As one who has found a passion for collecting Russian art, I ended this trip with an even greater appreciation for the artists who are carrying on these fine traditions. I feel as though the purchase of their paintings is a noble cause because the money they receive will help carry the torch for solid academic training and high standards, allowing these traditions to pass on to future generations. I also have a deeper admiration for the few dealers that carry Russian art. Deep connections, intense work, and a willingness to navigate convoluted government bureaucracy are all required to bring these works to foreign soil. There are lessons to be learned from the Russian academic system and the artists' union — and from the current popularity of this type of art among collectors. Perhaps the international art world will soon return to valuing these disciplines. ■

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ALEXEY NIKOLAVICH



MIKHAIL KUGACH

