



COLLECTORS' FOCUS

The market for Soviet Non-Conformist art is strengthening, but these intense, politically charged works are still relatively undervalued. It's a good time to be buying, dealers report. **Emma Crichton-Miller**



- 1** *Two Fragments*, 2014
Ilya (b. 1933) & Emilia Kabakov
(b. 1945)
Oil on canvas, 175.5×333.5cm
Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg, \$750,000
© Ilya and Emilia Kabakov
Courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus
Ropac, Paris-Salzburg
- 2** *Taj Mahal*, 1963
Oskar Rabin (b. 1928)
Oil on canvas, 68.7×91cm
Christie's London, Russian Art (2 June)
Estimate: £15,000–£20,000
Christie's Images Ltd 2014
- 3** *Boy with Balloons*, 1957
Oleg Tselkov (b. 1934)
Oil on canvas, 103.5×68.5cm
Sold for £238,000 at MacDougall's
Fine Art Auctions in November 2008
Image courtesy of MacDougall Arts Ltd

It is impossible to separate the history of Soviet Non-Conformist art from the cataclysmic events that shaped its emergence in the post-war Soviet Union. The movement broadly encompasses artists working outside the official system of Stalin's Union of Artists, between Khrushchev's condemnation of Stalinism in 1956 and the advent of glasnost in 1986. Its most prominent exponent, Ilya Kabakov, has described it as art driven by the total rupture between the 'absolutely idealised artistic world' of Socialist Realism and real life, as artists attempt to express 'a powerless existence'. Works vary greatly in style and tone, from the moody still lifes and landscapes of Oskar Rabin to the exuberant, ironic paintings of Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, the pioneers of Soviet-style Pop Art (Sots Art). With artists clustered in groups in Moscow (the rebellious Lianozovo; the community around Sretensky Boulevard; the Moscow Conceptualists), Leningrad and Odessa, the work produced has an intensity of purpose that reflects the severe punishments – exile, beatings, imprisonment, poverty – that hung over its creators. It is partly this emotional charge that has drawn collectors from the beginning and, today, it is partly this historical context that explains continued interest among both Russian and Western collectors.

In 1962 Khrushchev condemned as degenerate the artists exhibiting in the Manege exhibition hall

in Moscow, and until 1974 (when Oskar Rabin and Evgeny Rukhin organised the 'Bulldozer Exhibition' in an urban forest in Moscow, so-called because it was broken up by police with bulldozers and water cannons) underground artists showed only in their rooms, selling to friends, interested journalists, diplomats and academics. Many artists worked in what Anna Chalova, co-director of London's Aktis Gallery, describes as the 'suitcase format', creating work that could easily be smuggled abroad. Figures such as George Costakis (a Russian of Greek extraction who worked at the Canadian Embassy in Moscow) and American economist Norton Dodge, established collections that included artists such as Dmitri Plavinsky, Dmitry Krasnopevtsev, Vladimir Nemukhin and Vasily Sitnikov. Eric Estorick, founder of the Grosvenor Gallery in London, exhibited Oskar Rabin as early as 1964. But if collecting underground art was largely a political act, it was Sotheby's 1988 sale in Moscow that opened up the market for Non-Conformist art, tapping both Western and Russian collections. It realised around £2m and sparked a short-lived frenzy of international interest, only to be subsequently crushed by the collapse of the Japanese economy.

Ilya Kabakov survived this market crash. He left the Soviet Union in 1987, finding almost immediately an international following for his conceptual installations. Last year Roman



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he says. While the majority of buyers are Russian, there are also European and American collectors. In the last five years, 90 per cent of the work on the market has come from Western collections.

Evelyn Heathcoat Amory, a specialist in Russian pictures at Christie's London, agrees that most of the best-known names (Oleg Vassiliev, Erik Bulatov, Rabin, Semyon Faibisovich, Tselkov) are undervalued, 'particularly in light of the international post-war art market at present'. Christie's London sold Tselkov's *Person with Fork* (1983) in 2012 for £127,250, and in its Russian Art sale on 2 June, the auction house is offering Rabin's *Taj Mahal* (1963; Fig. 2) with an enticing estimate of £15,000–£20,000. Sotheby's, which revived its Modern and Contemporary Russian Art sales in 2007, has done particularly well with Vladimir Weisberg, often dubbed the Russian Morandi. Frances Asquith reports that three of the top ten prices for this metaphysical painter were achieved last year, including £206,500 (estimate £60,000–£80,000) for *Still Life With Fruit* of 1957, with buyers pursuing works from the late 1950s. Another painter who appeals to Western taste is Plavinsky. His *Still Life* of 1967 sold mid-estimate for £97,250 at Sotheby's London in 2010.

James Butterwick, a London-based dealer, entered the market in 2008, buying 'visceral canvases' by Evgeny Rukhin. He says that the market is currently flat as his Russian clients are nervous about buying. That offers a good opportunity for other collectors. 'Date is really important,' he says. 'I don't think it is possible to talk about Soviet Non-Conformist art after 1992,' adding: 'It's a good time to be buying.' Anatoly Bekkerman of ABA Gallery in New York concurs that Non-Conformist artists – especially Tselkov, Rabin, Shteinberg, Masterkova, Yankilevsky, Sveshnikov and Rukhin – are undervalued. He has recently sold works by Nemukhin for \$140,000; by Tselkov for \$300,000; and by Masterkova for \$145,000.

Anna Chalova comments that for these artists, pre-exile work from their Russian period dating from the 1960s and 1970s 'is regarded as stronger'. As she puts it drily: 'The political troubles of the West are not so vivid or dramatic.' She feels that while there has not been much growth in prices since 2010, there has been a growth in interest. 'People see this as an investment opportunity.' **A**



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Abramovich and Dasha Zhukova reportedly paid up to \$60m for 40 works, including eight albums from his celebrated series *10 Characters*, created in the early 1970s. Since 1988 Ilya has collaborated with his wife Emilia, and *The Strange City*, their maze-like installation for the sixth edition of Monumenta, is currently on display at the Grand Palais in Paris (until 22 June). In April, Emilia commented that Ilya's paintings created before 1987 rarely come to market, and when they do they sell for between \$2m and \$6m; their recent collaborative works, such as the paintings on view at Thaddaeus Ropac, Salzburg (Fig. 1; 6 June–5 July), achieve up to \$750,000.

Like the Kabakovs, a wave of Non-Conformist artists left Russia in the 1970s and 1980s, headed for Europe or the USA. Their critical reputations rose steadily through museum exhibitions during the 1990s, while a few astute collectors – the German dealer Volker Diehl among them – gathered significant collections. From 2000 onwards, prices for earlier Russian art began to recover on the tide of new Russian wealth, but it was only in 2006, according to auctioneer William MacDougall, that the market in Soviet Non-Conformist art began to heat up. One of the key figures driving this renewed interest was Igor Tsukanov (whose magisterial collection formed the basis for the Saatchi Gallery's exhibition 'Breaking the Ice: Moscow Art 1960–80s', in 2012–13). Prices reached a peak in 2008. MacDougall's, which specialises in Russian art, saw Oleg Tselkov's oil *Boy with Balloons* (1957; Fig. 3) sell for £238,000 in 2008. But it is Kabakov who holds the auction record for Russia's most expensive living artist, when his 1982 enamel painting *Beetle* sold for £2.9m at Phillips de Pury that same year. Since then, according to MacDougall, the financial crash has had an impact on prices, particularly affecting less well-known artists. 'Today these are cheap relative both to Russian classic art and international post-war art,'