

Moscow on the Thames

As a prelude to London's Russian Art Week later this month, Michael Hall examines the phenomenal rise of the market for Russian paintings



Fig 1: Léon Bakst's oil sketch *Bathers on the Lido, Venice*, painted in about 1919, will be offered by MacDougall's Fine Art Auctions, the world's only dedicated auctioneers of Russian art, on November 27 (estimate £500,000–£700,000)

THEODORA CLARKE, founder of Russian Art Week, has the figures at her fingertips: 'Some 100,000 Russians live in London and three of the 10 richest Londoners are Russian.' Given the conspicuous presence of Russians in London, and the lack of embarrassment that many feel about flaunting their wealth, it's arguable that the main surprise about the city's biannual Russian Art Week is not that it's such a great success, but that it was founded as recently as 2012, when jokes about 'London-ski' were already rather stale.

Miss Clarke is the creator of the website Russian Art and Culture. From modest begin-

nings as a blog she started while studying for a PhD in Russian art at Bristol University, it has grown to become one of the world's biggest English-language online resources for the subject, covering the full range of Russian culture in the UK. Miss Clarke spotted that there was an opening for coordinating events for buyers of Russian art in London. As well as dedicated sales by the three major auction houses, London also has the world's only auctioneer specialising in Russian art, MacDougall's (*Fig 1*), and a roster of pre-eminent dealers.

The result is Russian Art Week, launched in November 2012, which will be staged in

June and November every year. The next will run from November 22 to 29 (*see box*), and will include, as well as auction sales, a broad range of exhibitions and other events. The energy that drives it is the presence of Russian buyers in London. William MacDougall, who founded MacDougall's in 2004, explains: 'Eighty percent of Russian art sold at auction worldwide is sold in London, much more than is sold in Moscow. Although London Russians matter, this is mostly to Russians living in Moscow, and Ukrainians living in Kiev.'

Although this may seem startling, it's not exceptional: the city is also the main market

for Dutch and French art, for example, but that is taken for granted. Nor is it surprising that most buyers are Russian. Mr MacDougall points out that this is paralleled in almost every national tradition: 'Most American art is sold to Americans. Most buyers of British art are British.'

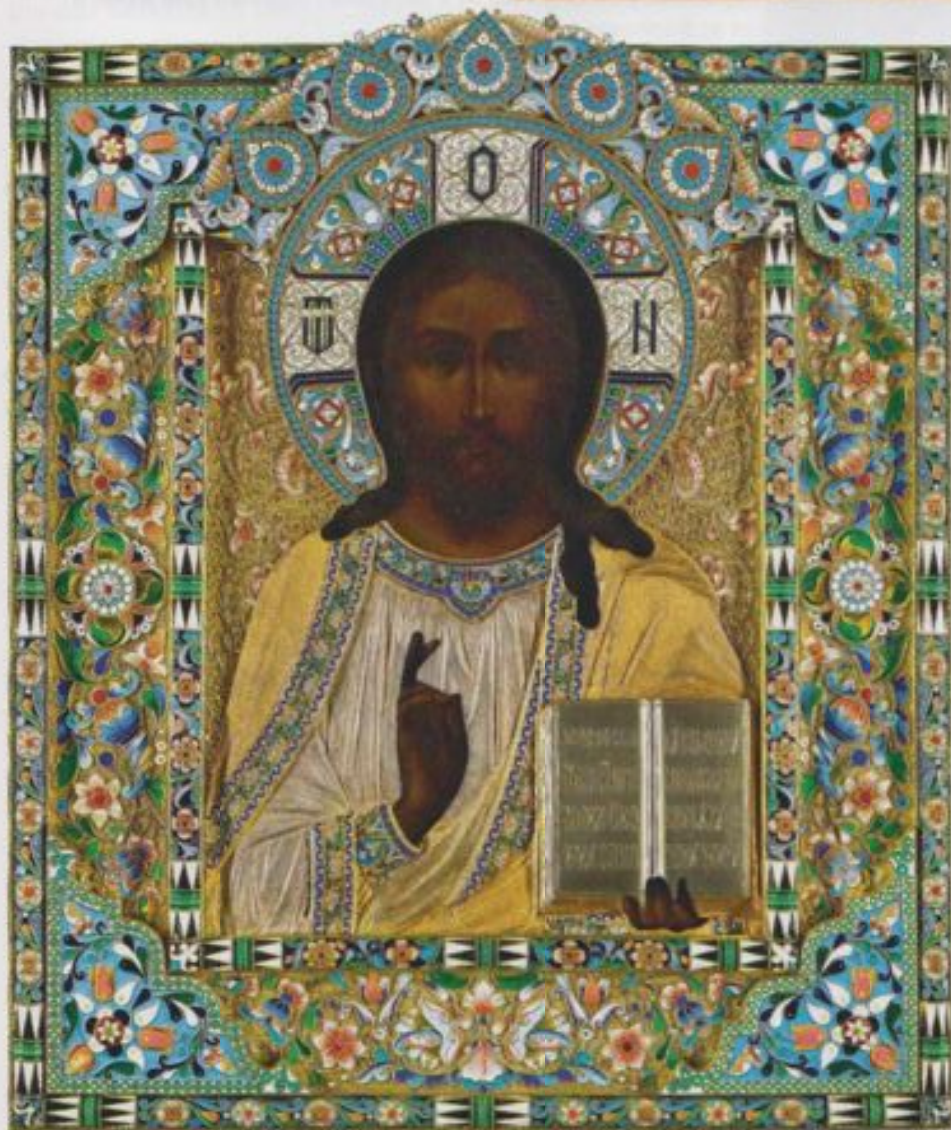
‘Eighty percent of Russian art is sold in London, much more than in Moscow’

That fact that the Russian art market in London seems so novel is simply because it is. As Ivan Samarine of Russian Art Consultancy, one of the city's longest-established dealers in Russian art, explains: 'In Russia, history has been running at about a million miles an hour for the past 20 years.'

Mr Samarine started his career at Sotheby's in 1988, when 'there were no Russian buyers of Russian art at all. Now, 70%–80% of



Fig 2: The most eagerly collected Russian works are by avant-garde artists of the early 20th century: this is *Sawers*, a watercolour of 1928–9 by Alexander Bogomazov. With James Butterwick



Russian paintings sell to Russian buyers'.

When the majority of buyers were Western, New York was the centre of the market, but the arrival of Russian buyers in force naturally shifted attention to London. It's much more easily accessible than the USA from Moscow or St Petersburg and has other attractions, too. 'Many Russians have houses here, and many have children being educated here,' explains James Butterwick, a dealer in Russian pictures since 1985.

Many are also happier doing business here than in their own country. 'Rich Russians are in London for all sorts of complicated reasons,' says Mr Butterwick. 'I can think of one client I know well—a delightful man—who, when I met him in London for the first time, I saw looking relaxed for the very first time in the three years that I've known him.'

In a period of only about 15 years, the Russians have re-created a national tradition of collecting that seemed to have been severed forever in 1917. Buyers are con-

Fig 3: This silver-gilt and cloisonné-enamel icon of Christ Pantocrator was given to Tsar Alexander III in 1888 to commemorate the rescue of the imperial family when their train derailed. It fetched £253,250 at Sotheby's in November 2012

scious of this, says Joanna Vickery, head of the Russian art department at Sotheby's: 'They're reviving a tradition that goes back to before the revolution, to the collectors of early-20th-century Russia and, before that, Catherine the Great.' Sophie Law, head of the Russian art department at Bonhams, agrees and suggests that the exhibition at Houghton Hall this summer of the paintings in the Hermitage that were sold from the house in the 18th century to Catherine the Great reflects a wider phenomenon—in terms of collecting, 'there's now a dialogue between Russia and England again'.

Mr Samarine puts it more bluntly: 'Russians are very fond of collecting—more than this generation of British people. They love the glamour, they love auctions and they've got plenty of spare money.' They're being attracted to the market in ever-greater numbers: Miss Vickery reveals that, at Sotheby's, 'we're seeing 30% of new buying activity in each sale'.

Add to that the fact that the two major lots at Sotheby's May 2013 Russian sales went to buyers who had never bought anything there before, and it's easy to understand why Russian art has become so very attractive to the salerooms.



Russian Art Week

Russian Art Week runs from November 22 to 29. For full details, including listings of all the auction sales, go to www.russianartweek.co.uk. Exhibitions include 'Vladimir Baronov Rossiné: From Cubism to Surrealism' at the St Petersburg Gallery, 5a, Cork Street, W1 (to 29 March); 'Reimagining Russia: The Landscape and Genre Paintings of Boris Chetkov' at The Westbury, New Bond Street, W1 (November 22–24); '20th-century Russian Emigré Art' at the Aktis Gallery, 10–11, Park Place, SW1 (November 19–March 14); and 'Visions of Utopia: Soviet Posters of the 1920s–1930s from the Marx Memorial Library' at Pushkin House, 5a, Bloomsbury Square WC1 (to December 5, illustrated above). Next year has been designated by the Government as the UK/Russia Year of Culture 2014. The full programme will be announced later this year: details, as of all Russian-related cultural events in the UK, will be posted on www.russianartandculture.com

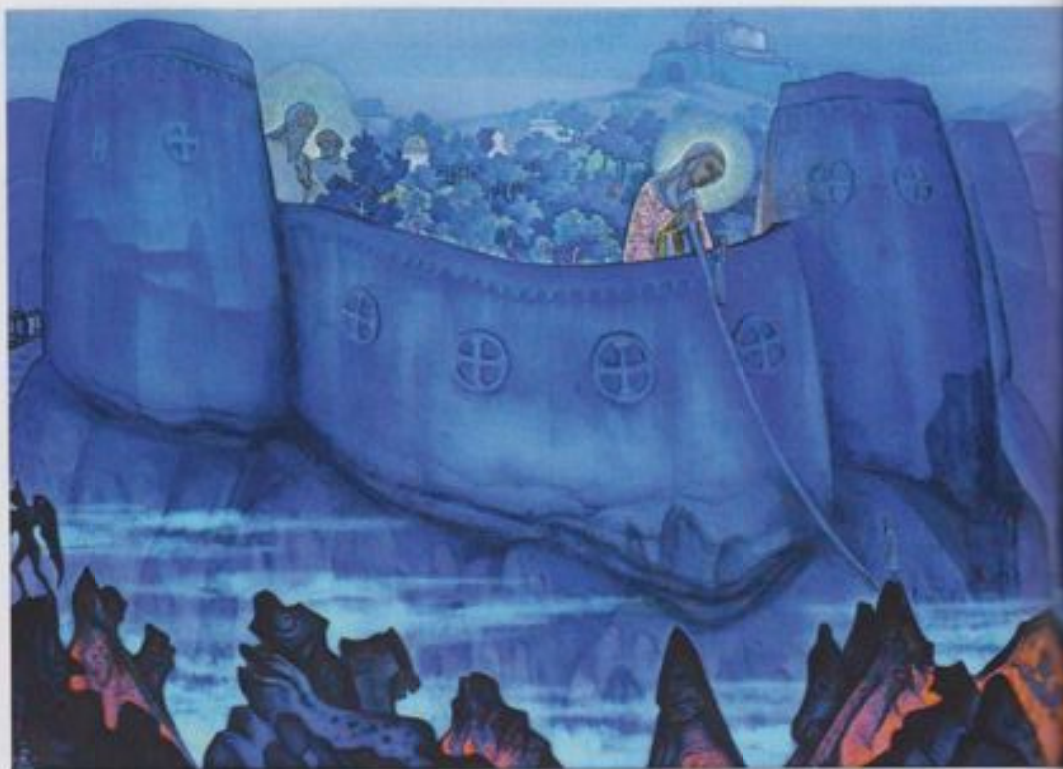


Fig 4: Nikolai Roerich's *Madonna Laboris*, painted in tempera on canvas in 1931, became the most expensive painting sold at a dedicated Russian sale when it fetched £7.79 million at Bonhams in June

Many prominent Russian buyers place a high priority on repatriating native works, none more so than the oligarchs keen to be seen repaying debts to the country that has so enormously enriched them. In September this year, the Fabergé collection formed by the billionaire businessman Viktor Vekselberg went on permanent display in part of the Shuvalov Palace in St Petersburg. It includes the nine eggs for which Mr Vekselberg paid the American publisher Malcolm Forbes just over \$100 million in 2004.

One of the finest 20th-century collections of Russian art was formed by the cellist Mstislav Rostropovich and his wife, the soprano Galina Vishnevskaya. Due to be sold at Sotheby's in 2007, it was bought *en bloc* by Alisher Usmanov—thought to be Russia's richest man and well-known in London as a majority shareholder in Arsenal football club—and is now on show in the Constantine Palace in St Petersburg.

In the short time that the Russian art market has flourished in London, there has been a major shift in buyers' interests. Mr Samarine recalls: 'The first generation of Russian buyers in the aftermath of the break-up of the USSR had all been educated in Soviet schools and they loved the big Russian 19th-century names—Shishkin, Levitan and so on—and they paid huge money for them. Now, there are buyers who left university after 1995— young millionaires in their forties, who have no real recollection of the Soviet Union—and

their outlook is much more international. They are much more drawn to the avant-garde. They love early-20th-century painting.'

He points to Robert Rafaelovich Falk's 1917 *Man in a Bowler Hat*, which Sotheby's will be offering later this month (**Fig 5**): 'It's exactly the cup of tea for this generation of Russians.'

This shift has, in part, been influenced by Russian law: no works of art more than 100 years old can be exported. This has increased the focus on Russia's major 20th-century painters (**Fig 2**): as Mr Samarine puts it: 'You can take a Malevich out of Russia, but you can't take out a mediocre 19th-century picture.'

One area where supply is a major issue is the quintessential Russian one of icons. There was almost no market for them in Russia before 1990, and so many were illegally exported, but, as Mr Samarine explains: 'After 1990, prices in Russia quickly rose to match the West and smuggling stopped, and with it the supply of top-quality icons.'

Although London supports some well-known specialist dealers, icons now rarely make headlines in the salerooms. A recent exception was an 1888 silver-gilt and cloisonné enamel icon of Christ Pantocrator (**Fig 3**), which aroused a great deal of attention at Sotheby's in the summer because of its imperial connection—it was given by the imperial guard to Tsar Alexander III and his family to commemorate their rescue from a train accident.

However, as Russia was overwhelmingly an exporter of art for most of the 20th century, there are plenty of significant works of all periods outside Russia. The Falk has come from a private collection in France, and the great coup of this summer's sales, Nikolai Roerich's luminous *Madonna Laboris*—which became the most valuable painting sold at a specialist Russian sale when it fetched £7.79 million at Bonhams—had been in the USA (Fig 4).

‘It’s a young market; there are tremendous discoveries to be made,’

The taste for more traditional art has not gone away: MacDougall's had a major success in its June sale this year with Ivan Shishkin's late, elegiac painting *Twilight*, which fetched a record price for the artist (Fig 6). Its success reflects the consistent appetite for top-quality Russian works of all periods. Like most areas of the market, having boomed in the years 2003–8, Russian art adjusted to the changed global circumstances after 2008.

According to Miss Law, 'there's been a slump in the middle, but what has dropped



Fig 5: Robert Rafaelovich Falk's *Man in a Bowler Hat* (portrait of Yakov Kagan-Shabshai) (1917) demonstrates the impact of Cézanne on young Russian artists in the early 20th century. It will be offered by Sotheby's on November 25 (estimate £2.5 million–£3.5 million)

Fig 6: Landscapes from the 19th century appealed strongly to an older generation of Russian collectors, but can still fetch high prices when the quality is outstanding, as Ivan Shishkin's *Twilight* (1896) demonstrated when sold by MacDougall's in June for £2.2 million, a record for the artist



there has been made up for in the rise of the best works.' As a result there are bargains to be had, according to Mr MacDougall: 'Icons, Soviet art, contemporary art and emigré art—work by artists who left Russia before becoming known—are all very good value, having seen much smaller price increases.'

One of the hottest areas of the market, avant-garde art produced in the decade and a half after the revolution, before Stalin turned against it, has had to face not only issues of supply—few of these artists had long careers—but also widespread forgery. A ring selling fakes made in Israel was broken up by the police in Germany in June this year, just as Russian Art Week was getting under way. The scale of the problem was revealed by the size of the haul—hundreds of works purporting to be by Malevich, Natalya Goncharova and Alexei Jawlensky, among others.

Dealers have been frank about the problem. In June, Theodora Clarke organised a panel debate on the subject, in which Mr Butterwick spoke eloquently (a video can be seen on www.jamesbutterwick.com). 'It's a big headache, and it's put people off collecting,' says Mr Samarine. 'It was caused by people going into the market without taking advice, but it's a case of once bitten, twice shy. The avant-garde was an unknown market in the West—there was a vacuum of knowledge and it didn't take long for fakers to exploit it.'

'You can't work in the field without facing forgery head on,' says Miss Law, who describes the salerooms' attitude as a 'zero-tolerance campaign' in which most works are treated as 'guilty until proved innocent—provenance is all-important'. She also suggests that forgery has become 'something that helps to keep up the shroud of myth that surrounds the market—think of the fake Fabergé egg in the James Bond film *Octopussy*'.

The positive side of this story is that it has encouraged more research into major art that, until 20 years ago, was known well in the West only to a few art historians. Sotheby's experience is typical. 'Over the past decade, ties between us and cultural institutions in Russia have got much closer,' says Miss Vickery. 'We now collaborate with many experts in museums and cultural institutions, and publishing has really taken off in Russia, with the result that there are now catalogues raisonnés and so on that didn't exist 10 years ago and that's really helped.'

Despite the market's focus on Russian buyers, it seems impossible that collectors outside Russia won't get excited by these developments. As Mr Samarine puts it: 'My wife deals in Old Master drawings and, basically, it's just a case of recycling works, with an occasional new attribution, whereas what I think is the fantastic thing about Russian art is that it's still a young market and there are still tremendous discoveries to be made.'