
A Question of Values

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PRESS STATEMENT – A Question of Values

There have been several articles published in Moscow, London and New York since late April 2011 that record a number of accusations against two Western art historians and their publications on Natalia Goncharova. Anthony Parton's, **Goncharova – The Art and Design of Natalia Goncharova**, appeared in October 2010, and Denise Bazetoux's, **Natalia Gontcharova – Catalogue Raisonné**, appeared in March 2011.

These articles have been generated by the Moscow financier and collector, Peter Aven, who has appealed to the Director of the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Irina Lebedeva, together with Tretyakov Gallery curators, to Moscow art dealer and writer, Andrei Sarabianov, and to London art dealer James Butterwick, for their support in criticising the two Western publications on Goncharova.

In the most recently published article, the June 2011 issue of ARTnews, "Protecting Goncharova's Legacy", Peter Aven is quoted as saying that "the time of scholarly discussion has passed – now is the time for legal action."

There has been no evidence so far of any scholarly discussion. The scholarly discourse on the work of Natalia Goncharova has not even begun. And now the West is being threatened with legal action. For what, one wonders?

Of all the things that most shock the Western mind in all this is the flagrant disregard for two most fundamental values.

The first is the value of academic freedom and freedom of speech.

The second is the value of freedom of the press, i.e., unbiased and unprejudiced reporting.

In this case, the voices of the English and the French art historians have barely been heard, while those of Moscow are repeatedly quoted, led principally by Tretyakov Gallery staff.

What would be the apparent reasons for the Tretyakov Gallery attacks on these two publications and their authors?

As they are quoted from their open letter to the English publisher of Anthony Parton's book and as reported by ARTnews, the Tretyakov Gallery "curators regard themselves as the guardians of Goncharova's legacy" and so "the appearance of the books was particularly unwelcome because the museum has been working for some time on a major monographic exhibition".

What museum in the West would claim exclusivity "as the guardians" of an artist's legacy? Protectors of the works in their care, to be sure, but not holders of any copyright either as "experts", arbiters, or as having a publishing monopoly on that artist. It is indeed well known that, after the death of the author, the right to authenticate a work of art is not exclusive to any expert; and that moral rights, where applicable, are reserved to the heirs of the author. Academic freedom attacked. Freedom of speech attacked.

What museum in the West – or reputable curator or art historian – would base their categorical assertions about the authenticity of works from reproductions in a book as Tretyakov curators are reported to have done, to then declare that "60 to 70% of the works illustrated are fakes"? Where is the "scholarly discussion" in this? Where, indeed, is the scholarship in this?

What museum in the West would attack art historians publicly, to embarrass and shame them, with accusations about works of art that they – the accusers – have never seen, to then assail the authors with imperious, even demeaning, attacks on their scholarship? And all of this without any facts to substantiate their accusations quoted anywhere.

We are not used to such manners in the West. We honour academic freedom and we honour freedom of speech, neither of which has been honoured by the spokespersons from the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow.

Who, it turns out – as can be found on the on-line site of ArtInvestment. ru that first published the Tretyakov Gallery (and other) attacks on Denise Bazetoux and Anthony Parton – are advisors to the Russian art market and ArtInvestment, financed by Peter Aven.

Vested interests, conflicts of interest, appear to be the driving forces in this whole campaign against two Western art historians. This is undisguised by the presence of two art dealers at the sides of Peter Aven.

Which contributes to the astonishment that an American art magazine, ARTnews, has become the voice of Moscow, and this to the detriment and compromise of the two Western art historians and a fair press.

InCoRM, a non-profit organisation, promotes research and scholarship on Russian Modernism. It promotes ethical practice and condemns unethical practice as this is incompatible with scholarship and the pursuit of knowledge. InCoRM cannot tolerate the unjustified, unsubstantiated and unprofessional attacks on art historians Denise Bazetoux and Anthony Parton.

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See also

The Art Newspaper, “[The Real Natalia Goncharova](#)”, Claudia Barbieri, April 2011

The Art Newspaper, “[Two New Publications Come Under Critical Assault](#)”, Sophia Kishkovsky, June 2011

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