

CHRISTINA BURRUS

The Valeri Dudakov Collection



Christina Burrus is an art historian and a restorer. During the 1990s she curated *Chagall in Russia* at the Fondation Gianadda in Martigny, Switzerland, as well as several exhibitions around Diego Rivera (Paris, Switzerland, Mexico, Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Stockholm). She is author of numerous articles on contemporary artists as well as *Art Collectors of Russia – The Private Treasures Revealed*. christinaburrus@gmail.com

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Valeri Dudakov likes to be thought of as an artist. Born in Moscow in 1945, he studied art and went on to become a successful record sleeve designer. He feels that the high quality of his collection of Russian paintings from the twenties and thirties, which he considers to be one of the best in the country, is attributable to his vocation. Valeri Dudakov has not only inherited the creativity of his grandfather, who was a book binder, he has also been blessed with his father's business acumen. His father, who was a civil servant in the Ministry of Finance, "had no contact whatsoever with the world of art".

Dudakov's ambition is to reconcile the two traditionally opposed spheres of art and State by giving collectors, who until now have been constrained to operate in semi-secrecy, an official status. With the support of Raissa Gorbachev, he founded the "Collectors' Club" in 1987, and then the "Collectors' Union". The latter had a broader perspective and aimed at providing a forum for anyone who possessed at least three objects capable of forming a so-called collection.

He felt it was important for the Union to have a clearly defined constitution. The machinery of a State agency, even if it is unwieldy, is paramount in safeguarding collectors whom the Soviet regime tended to confuse with all manner of traffickers, thus subjecting them to arbitrary measures and extortion. Dudakov was also behind the great "Museum of the Twentieth Century" which as yet exists only on paper, but he has not lost hope of one day seeing the project realised and would give the finest pieces of his collection to become its curator.

This metamorphosis of collector to curator may seem surprising, but from the time he started collecting, between

1965-70, the young art history student had a very academic approach to the artistic world.

He relates how a meeting with one of his professors was formative: "At the home of Dmitri Vladimirovich Sarabianov,



Valeri Dudakov in his Moscow apartment, 1992.

who was not just a professor but a veritable guru to his pupils, I saw some Russian avant-garde canvases for the first time. I had been too young when the exhibition, which was a comprehensive survey of banned art from the beginning of the century, took place in 1957 at the Central House of Artists. It was through D. V. Sarabianov that I discovered Larionov, Lentulov, Exter and, most importantly, Liubov Popova whose spirit and vitality made me realize the true importance of the artistic explosion in the first decades of the twentieth century.”

In 1965, Valeri Dudakov was twenty. He had discovered the pleasures of wandering through the picturesque streets of the Arbat where, not far from Red Square, clusters of antique shops used to sell the inauspicious masterpieces that no museum dared acquire.

Dudakov’s intuitive recognition of art developed as he walked around and, one fine day, he was amazed to identify a landscape by Robert Falk among the clutter of canvases:

“Out of curiosity I went into the shop and glanced nervously at a view of *Paris, the Seine and a Boat*. I managed to decipher the signature: the painting was Falk’s work. I knew of this painter through the notorious exhibition of 1958 which had created a scandal when the head of State had walked out, brutally giving the 1922, *Nude*, a new title which, in his opinion, was better suited to the “vulgarity” of this “degenerate” work of art: *Naked Valka*. But I also knew about Falk through the many articles that my professor, Sarabianov, had written about him.

“I did not buy the Paris scene, but came across it again on a visit to the artist’s widow, Angelina Vassilievna. She complained that this landscape had cost her a great deal of money: 450 rubles, but she had made a point of assembling her husband’s scattered works. It gave me great pleasure rediscovering the first painting I had ever coveted.

“To tell you the truth, my head swims when I recall all the treasures in those little second-hand shops in the Arbat quarter. There were drawings by Somov, sketches for stage sets by Korovin, canvases by Serov which would be snapped up today, and dozens of Impressionist paintings, all jumbled up together, not to mention many still lifes from abroad from every period imaginable.”

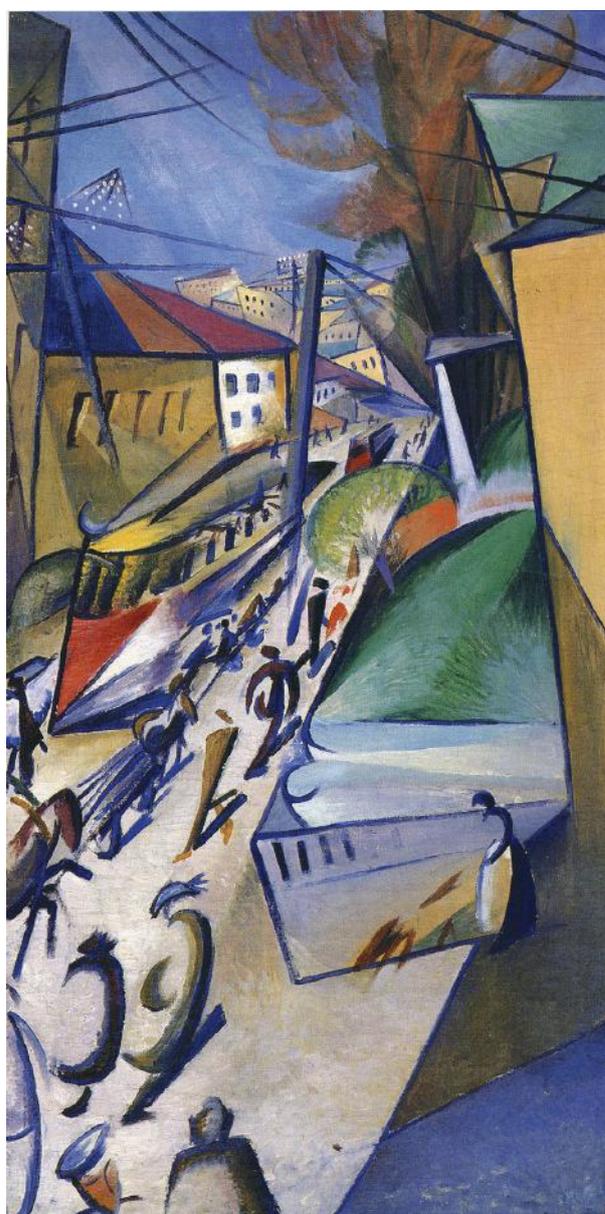
The collector had other influential encounters: he made the acquaintance of Glezer, another collector whose tiny apartment was covered with works by banned painters and at his home he met Oscar Rabin, the guru of the non-conformist younger generation.

“We spent nights in non-stop argument. Long pensive silences were followed by passionate debates which fired our host, a spirited man with a sharp tongue, who sometimes appeared to be highly cultured and sometimes totally ignorant.”

One day, Oscar Rabin lent him one of his works, *The Violin*, to hang temporarily in his home. “When it was put up on the wall, Rabin’s painting seemed so isolated, so melancholy, that I lost no time in hanging beside it an engraving by Yuri Kupferman (known as Kupfer), bought in Gorki Street, and an etching that Dimitri Plavinsky had given me. That was the start of my collection.”

Dudakov’s visit, in 1970, to Vladimir Veysberg’s studio in Arbat Street was a third important encounter.

“ ‘What do you want?’ , asked the painter, examining me suspiciously. ‘Have you come to look or to buy?’ He stressed this last word and I immediately realized that neither visitors nor admirers were of interest to him. I pretended to be a buyer. He then



Alexander Bogomazov, *The Tramway*, 1914
Oil on canvas, 142 x 74 cm.

asked me point-blank how much I had to spend. Embarrassed, I mumbled something about three hundred rubles, which I did not have on me but could lay my hands on pretty quickly. The artist hastily grabbed his canvases and said abruptly: ‘Here are some pictures valued between three hundred and five hundred rubles. When you have made your choice, I will show you some worth one thousand rubles or more.’ ”

Dudakov stopped him and hastily chose the cheapest of the ones he had been offered, *White Geometry*. “That day marked the birth of my frenzied desire to collect. Veysberg’s canvases danced before my eyes. Any one of them could have belonged to me.”

Gradually, Dudakov was admitted into the extremely select circle of collectors which possesses its own distinctive code of behaviour and rules.

“I learnt my profession the hard way, and the lessons were often painful. But I was lucky enough to meet someone who introduced me to this corner of the business world and guided me on a journey that was fraught with difficulty. After Sarabianov and Rabin, my third mentor was Yakov Evseevich Rubinstein, a well-known Muscovite collector who originally came from St. Petersburg. I met him at an exhibition called, ‘The Portrait and the Self-Portrait in Private Collections’.



Paintings by O. Rozanova, V. Podarski, S. Vitberg.
Sculpture by V. Koleitchenk.

This was to be the last event organized by the Collector’s Club which was subsequently banned and which I want to revive in the light of Perestroika.

“One evening, my wife and I were invited to Rubinstein’s home in Levchinsky Street. Going through the door of his apartment was to enter a strange and fascinating world. The curtains were drawn and the whole area appeared to be completely inundated with paintings, which covered the walls from floor to ceiling. The best and the worst were hung together indiscriminately. These rooms, lined with pictures, became the haunt of unlikely gatherings. Here the art world rubbed shoulders with crooks, and academics argued with young dilettanti who might equally well be wealthy heirs or layabouts.

“Rubinstein never got bored with these get-togethers, and enjoyed the comedy of manners in the same way as he would a show.

“He had built up his collection after the war. His friends nicknamed him Kuba which, in addition to being a derivative of the name Yakov, was a most appropriate diminutive: each time one of his numerous suppliers offered him something, Yakov would examine each item in great detail with an unerring eye and choose the best but pay the lowest possible prices.

“He would even buy things he had no direct interest in and put them to one side as stock (*kubyshka* in Russian), which he could later trade with other collectors. His collection mainly comprised pictures and drawings: masterly works by Larionov, Tatlin, Goncharova, Lentulov, Mashkov, and Petrov-Vodkin were hung side by side with downright daubs.

“My first exchanges were with Yakov. This practice was, at the time, the best way to build up a collection. Sometimes, we wouldn’t exchange just one work for another, but whole sections of wall! We called that type of exchange, ‘wall for wall’. Other renowned collectors would do the same: Gunst, Chudnovsky, Torsouv, Abramian, Smolennikov, etc. Communal apartments changed owner in this way, too.

“This practice may surprise western collectors, but you must not forget that at the beginning of the seventies, the work of banned painters could be bought for next to nothing.

“For example, the daughter of Lev Fiodorovich Zhegin, a friend of Larionov and Goncharova, parted with her father’s canvases for five or six rubles. Families of artists blacklisted by the regime lived in a constant state of fear. Zhegin’s daughter, Varvara Tikhonova Zhegina, had seen most of her loved ones arrested and deported. She was constantly anxious about her husband whose only fault was that he had been the son of one of the greatest modern-style architects in Russia. She was no expert when it came to art, but she loved it passionately, with an almost mystical fervour. She lived in one room in a communal apartment near Crimea

Square, where she held gatherings for former pupils of Lev F. Zhegin and Vera Yefimovna Pestel. The room was filled with paintings, which included some magnificent Larionovs. She was obliged to part with these works in order to survive, and she was only too happy to sell some of those canvases, worth a fortune today, at a ridiculously low price.”

There was another way of acquiring *objets d’art*: this was when major collections of the past were broken up and put on the market or, more accurately, sold off at rock-bottom prices by the collectors’ heirs.

“When Vinogradov died in an old people’s home



Interior of Valeri Dudakov's Moscow apartment.

at the age of ninety, his heirs notified certain art lovers in strict confidence and, in several days, had disposed of his fabulous collection. Vinogradov, who was one of the heads of the Moscow Fine Arts Commission and head of the State Depository of Painting in Moscow, had not only collected works of art. He had held onto everything: *luboks* (hand-coloured folk prints hawked by pedlars all over Russia), coins, and even all kinds of tickets. An impressive selection of gingerbread, which had survived the dark years of famine, was found at his house and was given to the History Museum of St. Petersburg. These disparate objects shared a home with extremely rare pieces, futurist albums by Mayakovsky, precious editions, and canvases by Larionov and Goncharova.

Another collection, that of Rossiysky, valued at more than 6 million rubles, disappeared virtually without a trace. It had taken more than half a century for this enlightened art lover to collect unique furniture, hundreds of paintings, and countless decorative objects. His fabulous collection of antique pipes also vanished into thin air.

“When a sale was scheduled to take place, possible buyers were discreetly notified. But these were dealers, not

collectors, who were more like door-to-door salesmen and fought tooth and nail over this booty, buying it to sell all over the country. This is how vestiges of once-famous collections, like that of Blok or Geltzer, came to be found in the furthest reaches of the provinces.

“This anarchic situation, which lasted for so many years, shows how you could do business, even with a modest income. Today, of course, all that has changed. The little shops in the Arbat where you had to burrow under second-hand shoes or lift aside roles of coarse canvas to discover a painting by Falk or Larionov are long gone. Important western dealers have

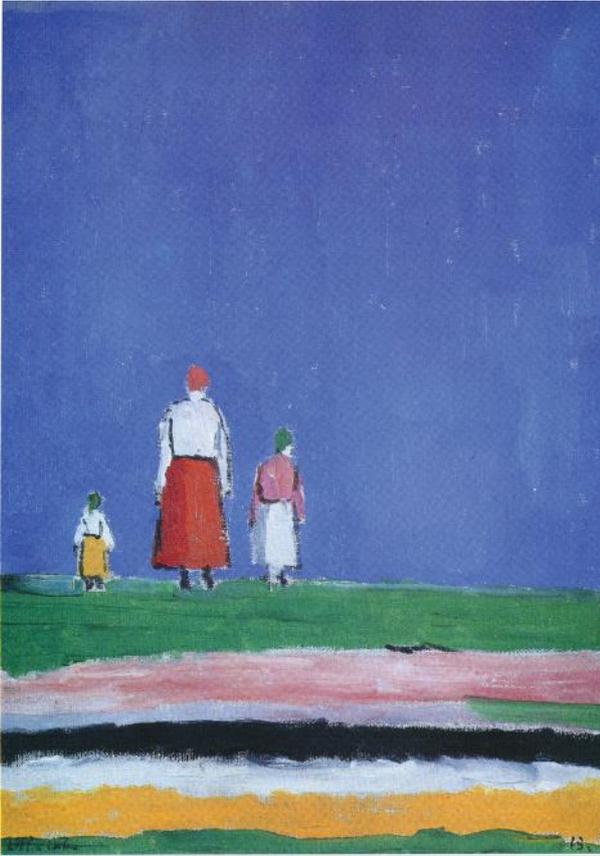


Interior of Valeri Dudakov's Moscow apartment with William Morris screen on the right.

arrived on the scene. The golden age of collecting is over and we must protect those who have devoted a large part of their time and money to safeguarding the Russian artistic heritage. This was my aim when I founded the Collectors’ Union.”

If Valeri Dudakov is to be believed, the garnering activities that went on in the Arbat quarter or the discrete auctions organized by heirs of major collectors were not the only ways of putting together a collection.

There was also the recovery of endangered masterpieces salvaged from public places. One of the rooms in Dudakov’s tiny apartment contains a piece of stained glass which is used as a screen between a child’s and a grandmother’s bed. An angel with outspread wings brings to mind figures from the Renaissance, several flowers picked out against the dark grass are reminiscent of Primitive art and the folds of a piece of brocade seem to have been lifted straight out of a Florentine fresco. However, this stained glass was definitely manufactured in the nineteenth century and is the work of the famous Pre-Raphaelite artist, William Morris. Valeri Dudakov unearthed these broken pieces on the site of a Catholic church which was being demolished in Moscow.



K. Malevich, *Three Figures*. Oil on canvas, 37 x 27 cm.

Dudakov's pictures are carefully arranged in rows on the apartment walls, and seem to bear witness to the violence with which art was treated in Russia under the Soviet regime. Kazimir Malevich's canvases are a poignant illustration, according to Dudakov, of the popular Russian adage, "There is no change without suffering".

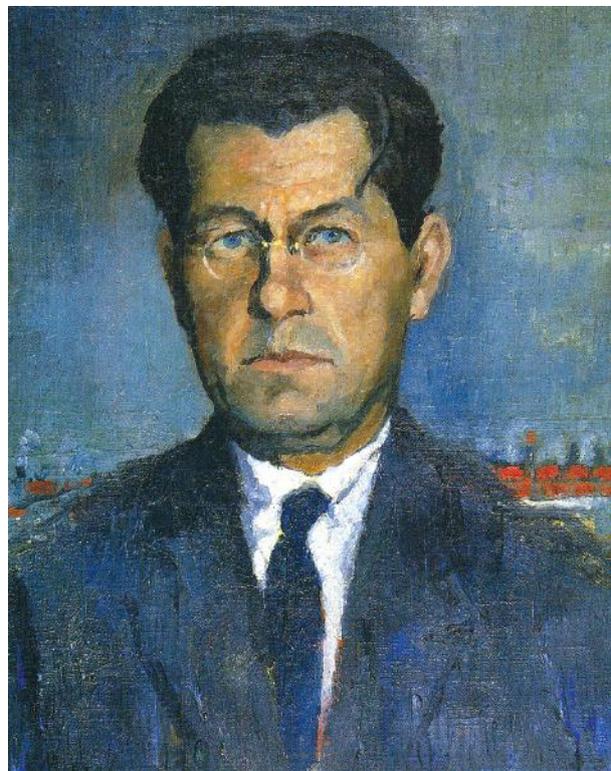
He bought two of the three Malevich paintings in his collection from the artist's daughter, Una Kazimirovna. He remembers the "terse, disjointed" stories she told that conjured up the suffering of a persecuted family whose fate was bound up with the country's tragic history. During the siege of Leningrad in 1941, Una Kazimirovna snatched a handful of real beans that [David] Shterenberg had incorporated into a still life and ate them.

While the *Three Figures* of 1913 [sic] by Malevich, the founder of Suprematism, display a certain optimism, depicting a vast sky against which the vivid silhouettes stand out, the two portraits painted in 1932 and 1933 express the most bitter disillusionment. The mother's eyes have retained an original innocence which hardship has not been able to extinguish. But the portrait of his brother, Mechislav Severinovich, is, according to Valeri Dudakov, "as cruel and implacable as this period was for our country". Behind the sitter with his disillusioned mouth, some red streaks symbolize the distant echo of revolutionary

dreams. The crimson splashes are an understated reminder of *The Charge of the Red Cavalry*, one of the painter's most famous works, a hymn to the irresistible advance of Revolution.

When he talks about his pictures, Dudakov stresses their historic context, which is of paramount importance. The judgement of the art historian prevails over personal taste. He says that he does not like some of his pieces, but that he chose them because they are representative of an important period or movement, and are therefore essential acquisitions. His collection is designed to be a retrospective of Russian painting from the twenties and thirties. There is no room for caprice, yet his dream is perhaps not far off: to become the curator of the future Museum of the Twentieth Century.

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K. Malevich, *Portrait of the Artist's Brother*, 1933.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 40 cm.