

Témoignages / Encounters



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During the 1950s I often met up with Boris Kochno, dancer and librettist for the Ballets Russes under Sergei Diaghilev and then in Monte Carlo after Diaghilev's death. Very close to my teacher, Alice Nikitina, Kochno showed me a large number of works for the ballet which he had been given by different artists who had worked for the Ballets Russes. Kochno willingly showed them to whomever wished to see them.

It was then that I, as a young dancer, began to discover the world of the ballet, a world I had known nothing about until then.

Looking at his sumptuous works by Leon Bakst, Alexander Benois or Mikhail Larionov, the stunning works by Natalia Goncharova, his rare photographs and documents, led to my becoming familiar with the names of all of these artists.

Kochno and Nikitina infected me with a passion for the art of the ballet. At his place I met a number of friends such as Serge Lifar and Samuel Wagstaff as well as a young collector of works for the ballet, Nikita Lobanov-Rostovsky.

Every day Alice Nikitina would draw me into the world of her past. She told me about the creation of the ballet, *The Cat*, with Lifar in 1927, about the tours of the Ballets Russes, and about the many artists with whom she had associated and whose works she owned. She lived in the Hotel d'Orsay in Paris and one day she showed me several tiny drawings by Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner which the artists had given her and which appeared to be extremely fragile. These were nothing like the many drawings made by Pevsner after his sculptures which flooded the art market between 1990 and 2000.

It was Kochno who first took me to meet Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. They lived on the third floor at number 16, rue Jacques Callot, where Alexandra Tomilina, who looked after the artists, also lived. I remember two ageing people in their late 70s who were extremely courteous but who only greeted me, carrying on a conversation in Russian with Kochno. Tomilina brought in the tea. The walls were covered with works which at the time I didn't know what to make of. What really surprised me was the overcrowded apartment.

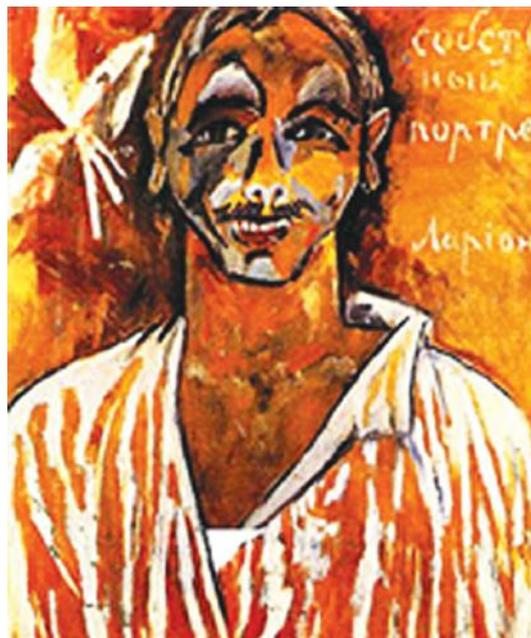
Goncharova got up and went into another room, coming back a few minutes later with some drawings which she gave to Boris. He was delighted.



Façade of 16 rue Jacques Callot where Goncharova and Larionov lived on the third floor from the 1920s, Paris. Photograph 2010.



N. Goncharova, *Self Portrait with Yellow Lilies*, 1907. Oil on canvas.
State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



M. Larionov, *Self Portrait*, 1910.
Oil on canvas
Formerly Tomilina-Larionov Collection

A few years later Kochno invited me come with him to visit the two artists in a retirement home in Fontenay-aux-Roses, near Paris, where I saw Goncharova and Larionov again. But now both of them were very frail and seemed to be slipping away. I would never see them again but I met the painter, Leonid Benatoff, who supported them financially.

Having entered a competition, I was awarded a scholarship from the Ente del Turismo Italiano to study with Clotilde and Alexandre Sakharoff. These two dancers had left an incredible mark on the history of the ballet between the two Wars and I was surprised that they were still alive. This meeting was amazing. Somewhat shrunken due to their years, they were nevertheless extremely elegant, spoke several languages, and were exceedingly cultured. They had known everybody and had witnessed all the events of the avant-garde wave from the beginning of the 20th century. Close to the greatest composers and painters of their time, they had taken up the cause of all the avant-gardes. Their teaching, their conversation, their memories were an enchantment.

Alexandre could entertain you for hours about how he had discovered Cézanne in Paris in 1903, or about Sarah Bernardt, how he had belonged to the group of Russian artists in the Munich exhibiting society, The Blue Rider, where he had shown with Vasily Kandinsky, Aleksei Jawlensky, Vladimir Bekhteev, Mariane Werefkina, and others. The walls of the Sakharoff's apartment in Rome were carpeted with paintings by these artists. Such an explosion of colours was lit up by

the light of Rome pouring in through the windows, adding to my enthusiasm and determination to learn more about these artists.

Clotilde told me about Alexandra Exter whose dress designs both she and her friend, the dancer, Elsa Krüger, used to wear.

There with Samuel Wagstaff, Alexandre invited us to visit the frescos by Piero della Francesca in Arezzo for a last time. It was extremely moving to see this 80-year-old man execute a few graceful steps in front of the frescos.

Passionate about the music we had studied, from Bach to Bartok, from Ravel to Debussy, from Chopin to Schoenberg – by the pavane of the *Après midi d'un faune* – we were fully attentive and eagerly absorbed their advice and remarks.

I often saw the writer and critic, Waldemar George, in Paris between my trips abroad. Once he told me that he had begun to work on a monograph about Larionov, who had recently died (1964), and that if I wished I could come with him to meet the new Madame Larionov whom he visited nearly every day. I went with him and thus after all those years I met Madame Tomilina again. The apartment was now tidy, but she was in need of money and very nervous, having just received a letter of expulsion because the rent hadn't been paid for a long time, as well as being threatened with electricity cuts. She was especially concerned about the future of the works by "Micha" (Mikhail Larionov) that were stacked together in a room of the apartment.



N. Goncharova in her studio, 13 rue Visconti, Paris, in the 1920s.
Panels of the *Españoles* can be seen against the wall.
Musée d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Having no money, she did not have the means to pay the rent for the artists' studio in the rue Visconti, situated but a few doors from the apartment on the rue Jacques Callot where Goncharova and Larionov had lived since the 1920s. So Madame Tomilina asked me to help her clear it. A few weeks later the trucks from two storage houses arrived at the appointed time.

Emptying the studio took two days. We, eye witnesses there to help Madame Tomilina, were astonished by the neglected state of the long unoccupied premises and the accumulation of works by the two artists. Their works were piled and stacked, totally cluttering this studio – which, in fact, was quite large – with dozens of portfolios full of hundreds (if not thousands) of drawings, watercolours, gouaches, sketches. Oils on cardboard or canvases were lying either flat or were rolled up, there was the series of *Españoles* (*Spanish Dancers*) in all sizes, projects drawn up on tracing paper, portraits of the artists or of their friends, drawings for sets and costumes for the ballet or the opera, fashion designs, dozens of early still lifes of flowers in vases bearing Goncharova's elegant monogram in Cyrillic as well as more recent ones, enormous screen panels, boxes that had never been opened, works by their painter friends, books and documents, while newspapers were piled up by the ton. An unbelievable chaos, 50 years of life and of creativity, was there before our eyes in an incredible Russian jumble.

I suggested to Tomilina that I make a kind of inventory of the works but that would have taken weeks of diligent and meticulous recording in order to do it properly, and there was no time. After a quick glance around, the warehousemen started taking the packets and boxes down and loading them into the trucks rather carelessly. We threw tons of newspapers and other papers into the trashcans which were soon full, so we

stacked the rest on the pavement. Two days later everything had been taken away and deposited randomly in the storage rooms at the two Paris warehouses, for which Tomilina was never able to pay.

All these works disappeared from sight for the next thirty years and it was only after the death of Tomilina in the early 1990s that some of them began to reappear either in Switzerland or in Paris from around the year 2000.

A small number of works selected by Tomilina (only those by Micha) were taken from the studio to the third floor of the apartment on the rue Jacques Callot, which was already full to bursting.

It was at this time that Tomilina got rid of an enormous number of works by Goncharova, giving them away to every one she knew. She spoke harshly about Goncharova, her rival, whom she did not like, and those who knew her at the time would confirm this. She simply dispensed with nearly all of Goncharova's works, happily thinking that they would be forgotten forever.

Confronted by this accumulation of works, it must be stressed that Goncharova was a relentless worker throughout her entire life until the very end. She left thousands of works which remain to be discovered – in no way could she have been envious of Picasso's enormous productivity.

Even in Russia, as Ilya Zdanevich told me, Goncharova's Moscow studio was bulging with paintings that were lined against every wall, everywhere. She had astounded the art world in Russia when, in 1913, she showed 773 major works dating from 1901 to 1913, selected from among the hundreds of canvases in her studio and for each one of which she would have done two, three, four preparatory drawings, watercolours, or small variants.

Even at that time it is hard to guess what the total output of her enormous productivity might have been. Larionov once remarked that Goncharova "thinks with her brushes".

On their return to Paris in 1915, Goncharova and Larionov brought with them hundreds of works rolled up in their luggage in view to future exhibitions in Europe. Like earlier ones, they were to have little success, however. The exhibition, *Michel Larionow, Natalie Gontcharova*, held at the Paris Galerie Paul Guillaume in June 1914, which the artists attended, had sold few works, and the 1913 exhibition at the Der Sturm Gallery in Berlin may not even have been hung; the works there had been returned to the artists only after the end of the Second World War. They were added to the works stored in the studio, rue Visconti, either rolled up or packed in wooden boxes.

Hundreds of works – oils, drawings, etc. – were sent from Moscow to the two artists, who were now living



Goncharova and Larionov in their studio, 13, rue Visconti, Paris, 1955. Photograph by Alexandre Libermann.

permanently in Paris, by an artist friend, Lev Zhegin. The artists' studio in Moscow had been closed by the Soviet authorities following a selection of a large number of their works for Russian museums around 1920. Zhegin was able to recover what remained between 1926 and 1930 and these works, together with boxes of books and documents, would also contribute to the stock-piling in the Paris studio in the rue Visconti without ever being opened. Those who express scepticism about the authenticity of works by Goncharova and Larionov (these sceptics are very fashionable today) did not see with their own eyes the hundreds and hundreds of works in the artists' studio nor their bulging Paris apartment at time of their deaths, so they cannot imagine the magnitude of uninventoried works. After the death of "her dear Micha" in 1964, Madame Tomilina, who had become Madame Larionov in 1963 soon after the death of Goncharova the year before, brought a bit of order to the disorder, but even then the works were not inventoried.

In her memoirs, *Ballets by Bronislava Nijinska* (1972), Nijinska writes that for the creation of Igor Stravinsky's,

Les Noces (The Wedding) of 1923, she was astounded when Goncharova presented her designs for the sets and costumes spread out on a table. There were about eighty beautifully executed projects on large sheets of paper, the colours magnificent and sumptuous. These were the first versions for *Les Noces* which in the end were not used. But a few weeks before the premiere Goncharova changed her projects and sets for a version that was much simpler in order to harmonise with the choreography and the music by Igor Stravinsky.

Working until the end of her life, the entirety of Goncharova's creations for the theatre would mount up into thousands of projects, costumes, and sets for the some sixty spectacles that were commissioned from her. Given the widespread dispersal of her work, it would be very difficult if not impossible to reassemble all this work.

Several art historians were preparing books on Goncharova and Larionov from the mid-1960s. In the apartment of the rue Jacques Callot one could meet Waldemar George, Mary Chamot, Michel Hoog, and Tatiana Loguine,

as well as several Soviets who were preparing exhibitions in Moscow. They were all working on publications on these two innovators who had been totally ignored, while their paintings had not even been catalogued by the sales rooms at the Hotel Drouot or Versailles. The price of works on paper at the time rarely went beyond 50 francs. (Equivalent to somewhere between \$10.00 and £5.00)

The city of Genoa organised a large and important exhibition on the *The City* in the 1970s and Madame Larionov asked me to select works by the two painters which would be included. She was invited to attend the opening and, not wanting to travel alone, begged me to accompany her to Italy for this memorable journey which would end with a stopover in Florence, in Padua to see the frescos by Giotto, and finally in Venice where we were invited by Lucia Marinetti (daughter of the artist). Several days were spent visiting the city and the museums. Madame Larionov – who did not go unnoticed with her hair cut in a bob, her white socks and tennis shoes – was tireless and, all in all, rather fun.

On returning to Paris she showered me with gifts, and from that time on she came nearly every day to the gallery in the rue de Fürstenberg, which I had opened in 1967. It became a popular meeting place for the many Russian avant-garde artists who lived around St. Germain-des-Près or not far away.

After having done my first exhibition of Russian art in 1969, *L'Aspect de l'avant-garde russe / The Look of the Russian Avant-Garde*, in 1969, for which Waldemar George wrote the introduction to the catalogue, my most frequent visitors included Ilya Zdanevich, Yuri Annenkov, Pavel Mansouroff, Sonia Delaunay, Nina Kandinsky, Xenia Puni, Elsa Triolet, and Virginie Pevsner. Lili Brik always dropped in to the gallery on her visits to Paris.

After the death of Waldemar George in 1970, I would lunch with Madame George in the rue de Bucci. She was very helpful at the time, bringing me works to sell, drawings by Fernand Léger, and she gave me gifts of works by David Burliuk, Stuart Davis, as well as a number of works by Goncharova and Larionov which I kept.

I showed the work of these two artists in several exhibitions, from *The Look of the Russian Avant-Garde* to *Les Russes dans les collections privées françaises / Russians in Private French Collections*, and *L'Archer à un oeil et demi – Les futuristes russes / The One and a Half-Eyed Archer – The Russian Futurists*. Between exhibitions I always hung works by Goncharova and Larionov on the walls of the gallery. But it was not until the early 1970s when Sotheby's held a sale, in London, of works devoted to the theatre and the ballet, that the prices of Larionov's and Goncharova's work began to rise; this, indeed, was the case for all the Russian

Avant-Garde. Meanwhile, during the 1970s and 1980s I did a number of Russian Avant-Garde shows devoted to other artists such as *Alexandra Exter, Kazimir Malevich, Kudriashev, Suprematism, Stenberg 2 Stenberg, et al.*

Being not far from her apartment, Madame Larionov did not hesitate to ask me to run errands for her, called on me when there was a water leak, or to take care of administrative matters. When she came to dinner at our house, she would bring works which she dedicated to my wife, Madeleine, or books. She lived very modestly in her memories, even frugally. Extremely generous, not one of her occasional visitors or collectors ever left the rue Jacques Callot without several drawings, watercolours, documents, or even paintings. One would be hard put to provide proof of the much-demanded "provenance" for these works other than "artist's studio". She was very much in demand by art historians and by museums, on whom she also lavished gifts.

At long last, recognition began to come slowly, thanks to the books on the artists by Waldemar George, *Larionov* (1966), and Mary Chamot, *Goncharova* (1972), which pleased Madame Larionov greatly. I spent a lot of time with Tomilina helping her to organise exhibitions of one or the other artist, which gradually became more frequent and, based on her suggestions, I would open boxes, look through, handle, and choose the works at will, to then write up the entries for the catalogues being prepared and take all the necessary photographs. I knew all these works by heart and, God knows, there were so many. Thus were organised the exhibitions at Bourges, Lyon, Brussels, Saint-Etienne, Genoa and, finally, one of Larionov in Russia. That was a first! At the gallery I did an exhibition, "Journey to Turkey", in 1971.

Time went by and Tomilina got older and became ill, rarely leaving her apartment, and opening her door to only the occasional visitor. Finally she moved to a retirement home in Lausanne, against her will, it should be said. An art historian and well-known dealer had the keys to the rue Jacques Callot and took advantage of her absence to help himself generously to the works.

On her death in the early 1990s, Madame Tomilina-Larionov left the entire collection of works in her possession to the Soviet State who, it turns out, did not even notice the pillage of most of the works that had been in the studio, rue Visconti, and the apartment in the rue Jacques Callot.

From what had been received, the Russian State awarded the French State guardianship of a certain number of works by the two artists. They can be seen in the Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, in Paris, for which a catalogue was published in 1995, *Nathalie Gontcharova Michel Larionov*.

Some Exhibitions of Goncharova and Larionov

- 1965 *Larionov and Goncharova*, Mayakovsky Museum, Moscow.
- Gift of pastels by Goncharova to the Pushkin Museum, Moscow.
- 1966 *Larionov*, Musée de Lyon, March-May.
- 1968 *Goncharova: Pastels*, Pushkin Museum, Moscow.
- 1969 *Larionov*, Acquavella Galleries, New York, and Galerie de Paris, Paris.
- Oeuvres théâtrales de Larionov et Gontcharova* (Works for the Theatre by Larionov and Goncharova), Musée de Strasbourg in an exhibition dedicated to Serge Diaghilev.
- 1969 *Gontcharova*, Musée de Lyon.
- 1971 *Larionov, Voyage en Turquie, 1907-1909*, Galerie Jean Chauvelin, Paris.

Artists Mentioned

- Waldemar George (Lodz, Poland 1893-1970 Paris).
- Natalia Goncharova (Nagaev in the Tula District 1881-1962 Paris).
- Boris Kochno (Moscow 1904-1990 Paris).
- Mikhail Larionov (Tiraspol, near Odessa 1881-1964, Paris).
- Serge Lifar (Kiev 1905-1986 Lausanne).
- Alice Nikitina (St. Petersburg 1904/1909 – Monte Carlo 1978).
- Clotilde (1892-1974) and Alexandre Sakharoff (1886-1963).

Publications Cited and Other Related Ones

- Mary Chamot, *Goncharova*, Paris, 1972.
- Goncharova – Stage Designs and Paintings*, London, 1979.
- Elie Eganbury, *Nathalie Gontcharova et Michel Larionov*, 1913. Eganbury was the pseudonym of Ilya Zdanevich.
- Waldemar George, *Larionov*, Editions Bibliothèque des Arts, Paris, 1966.
- Boris Kochno, *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, Paris, 1970.
- Michel Larionov, *Ballets de Diaghilev*, Editions Bibliothèque des Arts, Paris, 1970.
- Michel Larionov, *Une Avant-Garde explosive*. Textes réunis et annotés par Michel Hoog et Solina de Vigneral. L'Age

d'Homme, Lausanne, 1978. Includes Elie Eganbury, *Nathalie Gontcharova et Michel Larionov* of 1913 in French translation.

- Serge Lifar, *Ma vie*, Paris, 1965. English translation: *My Life*, New York, 1970.
- Tatiana Loguine, *Gontcharova et Larionov – 50 ans à Saint Germain-des-Près. Témoignages et documents réunis et présentés par Tatiana Loguine*. Editions Klincksieck, Paris, 1971.
- Bronislava Nijinska, *Ballets by Bronislava Nijinska*, 1972.
- Alice Nikitina, *Nikitina by Herself*, London, 1959.
- The Alexandre and Clothilde Sakharoff Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, Cambridge, Massachusetts.



Alice Nikitina and Serge Lifar in
La Chatte (The Cat), 1927