

## The Spirit of the Orient in the Art of the Moscow Nonconformist Artists: 1960s to 1980s

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Orientalism in Russian art of the twentieth century comprises vast, multidimensional materials to be considered. It is possible to highlight certain periods corresponding to the development stages of Russian art in the twentieth century: the beginning of the twentieth century—the epoch of Modern Style and Symbolism; the 1920s and '30s; the 1940s and '50s; the 1960s, '70s, and '80s; and finally, the 1990s and 2000s. Each of these periods can be distinguished by its peculiar interpretation of the theme of the Orient. It should be remembered that during the twentieth century, our country changed its name three times: Russia, the USSR, and the Russian Federation, and, in the last stage, it also changed its state borders.

But in spite of the great importance of Orientalism in Russian culture and art, Russian art history has no works devoted to this theme. Works frequently refer to Orientalism, a liking for the East, or the influence of Oriental art in monographs, covering works of that or another artist, who are mainly painters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly of the 1920s and '30s. It is interesting that in the era of Art Nouveau and the Silver Age, Japan and the Arabic countries represented the East, but in the 1920s and '30s, Central Asia and the Caucasus were more important.<sup>1</sup>

A more generalized description of the importance of Orientalism for European and Russian art was given by Maximilian Voloshin in an article about Martiros Saryan (1913). “Europe, like a weed, has grown on the vast body of Asia. She has always lived on Asian pushovers....Until our days, the Moslem East was used as a medium between Europe and extreme Asia, which we faced the other day.”<sup>2</sup>

Voloshin means Islam's influence on European art, implying that “extreme Asia,” or the Far East, was discovered—in an artistic sense—only in the middle of the nineteenth century. Voloshin also seems to find no difference between European and Russian Orientalism. He writes that “the historical East for Europe is the Mohammedan East, the Levant... A defective distorted nineteenth-century attitude towards Levant had been expressed in Orientalism.”<sup>3</sup>

He then explains what Orientalism in European art of the nineteenth century was: “Orientalism was a particular display of Romanticism. The emergence of ‘Orientalism’ in art emphasizes the moment of rupture of the organic, vital connection between East and West.

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<sup>1</sup> Старейшие советские художники о Средней Азии и Кавказе. По материалам выставки в Государственном музее искусства народов Востока. Автор вступительной статьи и статей о творчестве художников М.Б.Мясина. М.: Советский художник, 1973.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted from: *Волошин М.* Лики творчества. М.: Наука, 1988. С. 302.; The original text was published in: *Волошин М.* М.Сарьян // *Апполон*. 1913. №9, ноябрь. С. 5-12.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. С. 302.

Orientalism is the observer's opinion, a look from without."<sup>4</sup> Artists of the nineteenth century, instead of understanding methods of Eastern art, found for themselves in this art only "plenty of vivid themes and subjects."<sup>5</sup> According to Voloshin, this was due to conflicts between the physical and the spiritual world of European people, because the world of the senses, which connects the two others, is not available for every European person. Quite the contrary: "Having creation only in the world of the senses, the East knows exactly what the junction between art and life is."<sup>6</sup> In many respects, these words were dictated by the days in which he lived—the epoch of Art Nouveau.

He wrote about Orientalism in connection with Saryan's works, whose art borders East and West—half European, half Eastern—because of his background: he was an Armenian born in Rostov-on-Don (or Nakhichevan, as it was called at the beginning of the twentieth century) and studied in Moscow, and then returned to Armenia to become a leading artist of an Armenian national art school. But in 1923, Voloshin concludes that "Saryan is not an Orientalist!" because he managed to connect the East and the West in his art.

A kind of duality in Russia's relations with the East appeared in the nineteenth century, when the territories of Central Asia and the Caucasus joined the Russian Empire. Until the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia began to take these territories for her own. Artists' interest in Central Asia is also connected with this. Later, after a reconsideration of Asian art due to rich experience, a new understanding of Orientalism arose. "Orientalism"—writes one researcher—"has a long-standing tradition in European and Russian art. For Russian artists, the same as for European masters, the problem of the East was important and intimate, but they had their own relationships. Russia always felt her intermediate position keenly. The East would never be a place of escape for a Russian person" as it had been for Gauguin. The Orient was always somewhere just beyond the edge of Russia. And this feeling of proximity was not only geographic. Broad interest in and respect for the life, customs, and culture of other folk have always been a peculiarity of Russian culture."<sup>7</sup>

An understanding of both the Outer and Inner Orient is characteristic of Russian art, and of Nonconformism in the second half of the twentieth century. Central Asia, the Caucasus, Crimea (becoming part of the USSR), Altai, Buryatia, and the Far East were understood to be the Inner Orient up to the 1990s, while China, Japan, India, and other foreign countries, countries that only official artists could visit, were seen as the Outer Orient.

The Maghrib countries and the Arabian world were more attractive for artists at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and later again in the 1960s to the 1980s. The Southeast Asian countries—Vietnam, Laos, Kampuchea, and Korea—were "discovered" by Russian artists in the second half of the twentieth century. Such "discoveries" were frequently closely related with politics: destruction of the colonial system, formation of such concepts as the "Third World" and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., C. 302.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., C. 302-303.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., C. 304.

<sup>7</sup> Старейшие советские художники о Средней Азии и Кавказе. С. 11.

“developing countries,” and wars in Korea and Vietnam (where the USSR opposed the USA). In 1950, India became a republic. By that time (since 1943) the India - USSR Friendship Society had already been established. In 1971, a treaty of friendship and cooperation between India and the USSR was signed. Some Oriental countries that aimed towards capitalist development and Westernization, Japan and Iran (before 1979) for example, stood apart in those years.

Third World countries were within the orbit of political interest of Soviet leaders, and this offered an opportunity to turn to images of these countries in Soviet art. But unfortunately, only representatives of official art were allowed to make trips to these countries. The trips were organized by the Academy of Arts and the Union of Artists of the USSR. So exhibitions, usually held in Moscow, were devoted to materials from these trips, and in response, exhibitions of works of artists invited from the Orient were also held<sup>8</sup>.

A vast amount of graphic arts and paintings, created by official artists between 1950 and 1980 helps to give us an idea of how the theme of the East can be interpreted. Unfortunately, these materials do not interest Russian art historians today. We can say that this theme has been forgotten.

Exhibitions of foreign Oriental art in Moscow and Leningrad were very important in the official and unofficial artistic sphere. Exhibitions from China were primary, with both modern and traditional art. There were also exhibitions of Japanese, Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese art.

In 1959, an exhibition of modern decorative art and books from Japan was held,<sup>9</sup> with an exhibition of ten panels, *Hiroshima*, by Japanese artists Iri Maruki and Tosiko Akamatsu<sup>10</sup> (these artists soon became honorary members of the Academy of Arts of the USSR). Modern Vietnamese,<sup>11</sup> Mongolian,<sup>12</sup> Chinese,<sup>13</sup> Ceylonese,<sup>14</sup> and Ethiopian<sup>15</sup> art was exhibited, too.

All these exhibitions were a result of fresh interest in the world's variety, which began from the end of the 1950s following the score of political changes in the USSR, beginning with unmasking of the “Cult of Stalin” by Khrushchev at the Twentieth Congress of the Communist Party of the USSR in 1956. In 1957, the Sixth World Youth Festival was held in Moscow, with vast expositions of foreign art, both European and Eastern. This festival became a kind of “window on the world” after a prolonged policy of isolation in the USSR. At an international exhibition in Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure in Moscow was shown not only the art of Japan, Egypt,

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<sup>8</sup> For example: «Сто дней в Китае». Отчетная выставка произведений художников В.В. Богаткина, В.И. Забашта, А.И. Константиновского, А.А. Котухиной, С.Е. Селиханова. Каталог выставки. Союз художников СССР. М., 1957; *Верейский О.* Незабываемые встречи. // Творчество. 1958. № 10. С. 23-25. They were exhibited in Moscow in the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts and pavilions of Gorky Central Park of Culture and Leisure, and article reports about trips were issued, for example: *Бирштейн М.* Сенегал и Мали // Искусство. 1961. № 5. С. 4-51.

<sup>9</sup> *Эренбург И.* На японской выставке // Творчество. 1959. № 1. С. 20-21.

<sup>10</sup> *Кибрик Е.* Подвиг художников // Творчество. 1959. № 8. С. 3-5.

<sup>11</sup> *Пономарев Н.* Поэзия народной жизни // Творчество. 1959. № 3. С. 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Членов А.* Искусство народной Монголии // Творчество. 1959. № 3. С.22-24.

<sup>13</sup> *Кравченко К.* Москва-Пекин. Совместная выставка эстампов советских и китайских художников // Творчество. 1958. № 12.; *Николаева Н.* Обновление традиции // Творчество. 1959. № 4.

<sup>14</sup> *Членов А.* Художники Цейлона // Творчество. 1958. № 7. С. 24-26.

<sup>15</sup> *Савицкий В.* Афеоре Текле // Творчество. 1964. № 9. С. 21-23.

Korea, Mongolia, China, and India, but also that of Sudan, Syria, Vietnam, and Indonesia.<sup>16</sup>

The most prominent interest was in Chinese art with its huge amount of works. There were both political and artistic reasons for this. In China, the Communists came to power in 1949, and soon after, relations between China and the USSR, including cultural affairs, began to broaden.

Official artists depicted the Orient in accordance with the Soviet ideological doctrine, but this did not exclude the possibility of full-fledged artistic solutions.<sup>17</sup> China was visited very frequently before the beginning of the 1960s by Soviet artists from the Union of Artists of the USSR. It was first of all presented from an internationalist standpoint: industrial construction works, workpeople, etc., but national particularities (types and landscapes) were attractive as well. Portraits and industrial themes were predominant genres, and after these, in accordance with the hierarchy of genres adopted in the art of Socialist realism, were genre subjects and everyday life. The influence of Chinese art and interest in exoticism were more noticeable here. Pastiche was most prominent in landscape art.

It is possible to say that Soviet Socialist realism had an influence on Chinese art, as well as influencing the art of the German Democratic Republic and other countries of the Eastern Bloc. However, the principle of Socialist realism, “national in form, socialist in substance,” nonetheless afforded an opportunity for Soviet artists to express national specificity.

Very important is the attention paid to the problem of tradition and modernization, which helped to find a way for Russian artists to adapt Oriental art. On the one hand, it was the actual method of art—mixing traditional and modern Chinese, for example, with modern European art—for Soviet artists during material-gathering trips to China. On the other, this mixture became very significant in the '70s when distinguishing features of this historical method, associated with the new-coming postmodernism, appeared. From the end of the '50s, publications were issued on this theme.<sup>18</sup>

I have on my shelves numerous exhibition guides and publications (books and magazine articles) because they broaden my theme. Together with the State Museum of Oriental Art and the State Hermitage Museum, they have played an important role in the formation of unofficial art.

How could artists, having no chance to journey to the Eastern countries, familiarize themselves with Oriental art? One resource was the collections in the State Museum of Oriental Art that opened in Moscow in 1918 (at that time called *Ars Asiatica* and later in 1925-1962, the State Museum of Oriental Culture). These collections represent Oriental art from ancient to

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<sup>16</sup> РГАЛИ (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art), ф. 2329, оп. 4, ед. хран. 656, л. 42-47. (List of foreign artists' works)

<sup>17</sup> Советские художники о Китае. М.: Советский художник, 1959. By the tenth anniversary of the People's Republic of China in 1959, the publishing house Soviet Artist issued more books about Qi Baishi, Jiang Zhaohe, and Xu Weihong. See more: *Кравченко К.* У китайских друзей. М.: Советский художник, 1959.; *Богаткин В.В.* Поездка в Китай. Дневник художника. М.: Советский художник, 1959.

<sup>18</sup> For example: *Виноградова Н.* Современная китайская национальная живопись «гохуа» // *Искусство.* 1957. № 5. С. 63-72.; *Ан-Нуман Ф.* Иракская школа живописи и ваяния // *Искусство.* 1959. № 11. С. 48-49.; *Богданов А.* Национальные традиции и реализм (Искусство Объединенной арабской республики вчера и сегодня) // *Искусство.* 1961. №3. С. 44-46.; *Прокофьев О.* Традиции и современность в искусстве Востока. // *Искусство.* 1962. № 10. С. 46-52.

modern times. There are separate collections of art from Central Asia and Kazakhstan, the Caucasus, India, China, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Iran, Turkey, the Arab countries, Vietnam, Indonesia, and Burma, as well as the art of Thailand, Kampuchea, and Laos (this appeared in the 1970s). In the 1960s, African art collections started to be composed. It is interesting that the Museum's collection included both foreign and near-abroad Soviet art. In Leningrad, where there is an important school of Orientalism, collections of Oriental art can be found in the State Hermitage Museum. Small collections also appear in provincial museums. They are composed from objects gathered by private collectors between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century on the tide of a general liking for Japan.

Another important factor was that Orientalism (*Vostokovedenie*) grew in popularity as science advanced during the 1950s. In 1957, the First All-Union Conference of Orientalists took place in Tashkent, creating the publishing house Oriental Literature (since 1964, the chief editorial board of the publishing house Science). A magazine series, *Soviet Orientalism*, was published (later *Problems of Orientalism* and *Folk of Asia and Africa*) as was *The Modern East* (later *Asia and Africa Today*).

A new atmosphere in the USSR at that time was noted in detail by E. Neizvestny: "Intolerance in estimation of other artists' works and rejection of everything that in its own tendency differs from usual standards used to be considered one of valours for genuine and good artist not so long ago. Every day, we learn something new about our world. Many things that yesterday seemed new to us are out-of-date today; the limits of cognition widen constantly and at an incredible speed, as do changes in the world."<sup>19</sup>

Of as much importance was the new post-war condition of national republics. The cultural multiplicity of the USSR was discovered in a new way. The doctrine of art uniformity, when national peculiarities were repressed by standards of Socialist realism, was replaced by a new understanding of the variety found in national schools. Unfortunately, the problem of cultural policy change in art was not resolved in tune with modern times.

But we can say that the First All-Union Conference of Orientalists in 1957 turned out to be a great event in art, and the art critics of the times found a marked blossoming of different national schools of Soviet art. Decades of national culture, art, literature, and republican exhibitions began in Moscow and Leningrad and became an integral part of artistic life in the USSR from the end of the '50s.

Although the general theme of this article is Moscow's unofficial art of the 1960s through to the 1980s, I give consideration to this theme because all these events comprised the specific background against which unofficial artists were formed. Also, unofficial art was considered for a long time in isolation from processes in official art. This approach is unproductive today. Unofficial artists were either closely related to context of official art with commonality of some traditions or opposed this context. All these aspects are closely connected with Orientalism in art. Finally, also important is the era before 1962, before the notorious exhibition in Manège (the

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<sup>19</sup> *Неизвестный Э.* Открывая новое! // *Искусство*. 1962. № 10. С. 9.

works of the artistically rehabilitated “old” artists—R. Falk, N. Chernyshov, A. Deineka, V. Favorsky, and others—as well as explorations in the art of the new generation, artists of the “thaw”—V. Yankilevsky, E. Neizvestny, and the artists of E. Beljutin’s studio),<sup>20</sup> in which reformation in art flowed in a single stream. Division into official and unofficial art finally happened after 1962.

At that time, a significant context for interpretation of the theme of the Orient in official art was created, and it became a background against which unofficial and semi-official artists worked.

In the late 1950s, the phenomenon of Nonconformism—artistic dissidence—appeared in Russian art. Nonconformist artists were freer in their creative work than representatives of official art. This also affected such subject areas as the Orient.

Orientalism for both official and unofficial artists used to be a way to overcome the narrow limits of Socialist realism. Through connections with Oriental art, they became familiar with new systems of style, discovered a multiplicity of views of things, new methods of expression, and new content. But in official art, the permitted range of styles was narrower. And of course, they could not use the religious and philosophical aspects of Oriental art, whose aspects were very important for unofficial artists in the 1970s and 1980s.

To describe more accurately the peculiar character of perception and interpretation of the spirit of the Orient by Moscow Nonconformists in the 1960s-1980s, several political and artistic factors should be taken into consideration.

Knowledge of the Orient was acquired in several ways: through travels, through devotion to culture and philosophy of one or another Oriental country, and also through some quasi-Oriental “spirit of the Orient.” But Nonconformists who had not emigrated from the USSR in the 1960s-1980s were limited to the “Inner Orient” (with reference to trips). However, they expanded this concept by including in it Altai and Buryatia. Their devotion to Oriental philosophy, primarily to Buddhism and Yoga, enabled them to compensate for this unavailability of direct contact with the “Outer Orient.”

In the second half of the twentieth century, devotion to Oriental religions spread widely throughout Europe and the USA. Thanks to the Nonconformists, Russia also followed this trend. Interest in “alien” cultural patterns was connected with postmodernism with interest in regional versions of culture and in national art that had been substantially forgotten in the previous epoch of Art Nouveau with its ambition for universalism.

The “Moscow Underground” of the 1960s-1980s is not a monolithic, uniform phenomenon. It should be observed that Nonconformism goes through two generations—the so-called Sixties and Seventies. Characteristically, the “Sixties” was a return to an interrupted tradition of avant-gardism and European contemporary art, especially pop and abstract art. The “Seventies” were mostly connected with postmodernism when pictorial values, experience of surrealism, and symbolism were revived.

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<sup>20</sup> For more, see: Герчук Ю. «Кровоизлияние в МОСХ», или Хрущев в Манеже. М.: Новое литературное обозрение, 2008.

Usually, unofficial art is regarded as integral and total, without division into different generations. This approach, rejecting the role of unofficial art in art evolution, makes it impossible to understand some key moments in such art. However, the Sixties and Seventies were generations with different creative credos, artistic viewpoints, and styles.<sup>21</sup>

Exhibitions of modern Western art certainly have a great influence on unofficial art, considering the American National Exhibition in 1959 and the French National Exhibition in 1961 (both in Moscow's Sokol'niki Park). This especially applies to the Sixties. But experience in mastering Oriental art was important for some of them. And the Seventies explored new creative urges and dealt with them more deeply than did the Sixties.

So, after 1962, underground art was finally formed. The Renaissance was their main topic, as well as foreshortened Orientalism, traditions of Russia's Silver Age, and the art of the 1920s and '30s. The Sixties as a generation consists of two groups: first, the Lianozovo group, one of whose representatives was Nicolai Vechtomov; second, artists A. Zverev, A. Haritonov, and D. Plavinsky and a group of "Moscow metaphysicians" M. Shvarzman, V. Veisberg, D. Krasnopevtsev, and E. Shteinberg.

In the 1970s in Soviet art, postmodernism manifests itself through reflecting on historicism, love of different cultures, epochs, and regions. For artists, postmodernist eclecticism is not about familiarizing oneself with samples or models, but a disposition to free movement, even mental movement, in total cultural space.<sup>22</sup> The Italian researcher Akile Benito Oliva writes that "recreation of ancient languages implies not 'identification' but the ability to quote superficially."<sup>23</sup> So looking for masters (in that particular generation) who aspired to an authentic renewal of Oriental art principles or a deep understanding of its methods is not a valid response. It was more important for them to pass on a certain "spirit of the Orient," allowing them to withdraw from the traditions of European art, to use separated fragments—or the "debris" of methods and artistic principles of the Oriental master—finally inserting them into the reality of the new art sphere. It was more important for them to seek something general, similarities between the ways and the substantive structures of European and Oriental art, to find a space spanning national authenticity. This would, they considered, show itself through interpretation of the Oriental theme.

The Seventies coincided with a religious revival in the USSR. Although this religious awakening began in the 1960s, it was the trend to seek the spiritual; contemplating the metaphysical aspects of life was characteristic of the 1960s.<sup>24</sup> The 1970s saw a new religious painting tendency in Moscow's unofficial art.<sup>25</sup> The religious revival concerned Christianity and

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<sup>21</sup> For details, see: *Флорковская А. К.* Мутации стиля в советском искусстве 1970-х. К вопросу изучения живописной секции при Московском Горкоме графиков // Вестник славянских культур. 2009. № 2 (XII). Июнь. С. 82-90

<sup>22</sup> *Флорковская А.К.* Историзм 1970-х: в предчувствии постмодернизма // Русское искусство. XX век. Исследования и публикации. Кн. 2. М.: Наука, 2008. С. 488-510.

<sup>23</sup> *Олива А.Б.* Искусство на исходе второго тысячелетия. М., 2003. С.41.

<sup>24</sup> *Кусков С.* Творчество Э.Штейнберга в зеркале идей «Серебряного века» // *Штейнберг Э.* Опыт монографии. М., 1992. С. 167-177.; *Барабанов Е.* Истории после истории // Нонконформисты. Второй русский авангард 1955-1988. Собрание Бар –Гера. Издательство Винанд, 1999. С. 32.

<sup>25</sup> *Море: Флорковская А.* Религиозные искания в неофициальной московской живописи 1970-х годов //

other confessions, which had been repressed for political and ideological reasons. Also significant was interest in esoterism.

The influence of Buddhism was very significant, which was possible in those years only in unofficial art. Buddhism leaked into the USSR through the Iron Curtain as a Western interpretation, and, in addition to this, Buddhist centers in Buryatia were rebuilt and existing literature on Buddhism and Oriental philosophy published before the 1917 Revolution spread. The artists<sup>26</sup> read Egyptologist B. A. Turaev's *History of the ancient East*,<sup>27</sup> *Magical papers of Abyssinia*,<sup>28</sup> *From a history of the Tibetan Book of the Dead (comments) to texts about sarcophaguses*,<sup>29</sup> and others; S. F. Ol'denburg's *Buddhist legends*,<sup>30</sup> *Buddhist legends and Buddhism*,<sup>31</sup> *Buddhist art in India*,<sup>32</sup> and *Collection of images of 300 Buddhas from an album of the Asian Museum*,<sup>33</sup> and B. Ya. Vladimirtsov's *Buddhism in Tibet and Mongolia*.<sup>34</sup> Popular were books of traveler P. K. Kozlov (before the 1917 Revolution and in the 1920s): *Dead city Hara-Hoto: Pages from the history of expedition of the Russian Geographical Society directed by P. K. Kozlov*,<sup>35</sup> *In the heart of Asia*,<sup>36</sup> and *A short report of the Mongolian-Tibetan expedition of the Russian Geographical Society directed by Kozlov of 1923-1926*.<sup>37</sup>

Among works of the 1960s in Moscow was an unpublished dissertation, spread underground, of G. S. Pomerants, "Nihilistic religious-philosophical doctrines of the Far East" (1968). At the same time were published L. N. Gumil'jov's *Paintings of Old Buryatia*<sup>38</sup> and K. M. Gerasimova's *Monuments of esthetic thought of the Orient: The Tibetan Canon and proportions*<sup>39</sup> and *The Rig Veda Samhita: Selected hymns*.<sup>40</sup>

Also a very considerable source of information was Western, especially English-language, translated literature. These imported books were translated by enthusiasts, and copies, printed on printing machines, were spread among small groups. These included, for example, D. T. Suzuki's

Русское искусство. Исследования и материалы. Кн. 1. М.: Наука, 2007. С. 399-416.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with the artist S.Potapov, March 2, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> Тураев Б.А. История древнего востока. СПб, 1913; republished in 1935 and 1936.

<sup>28</sup> Тураев Б.А. Абиссинские магические свитки // Сборник статей в честь графини Прасковьи Сергеевны Уваровой. М., 1916. С. 176-201.

<sup>29</sup> Тураев Б.А. Из истории к Книги Мертвых. Несколько замечаний о текстах саркофага // ЗВОРАО. 1904. Т.3. С.15-25.

<sup>30</sup> Ольденбург С.Ф. Буддийские легенды. Часть 1. СПб.: Типография Императорской Академии наук, 1894.

<sup>31</sup> Ольденбург С.Ф. Буддийские легенды и буддизм // ЗВОРАО. 1895. Т.9.

<sup>32</sup> Ольденбург С.Ф. Буддийское искусство в Индии. // Известия императорской академии наук. 1901. Т. 14. № 2.

<sup>33</sup> Ольденбург С.Ф. Сборник изображений 300 бурханов по альбому Азиатского музея. СПб., 1903.

<sup>34</sup> Владимирцов Б.Я. Буддизм в Тибете и Монголии. СПб., 1919.

<sup>35</sup> Козлов П.К. Мертвый город Хара-Хото. М., 1913.

<sup>36</sup> Козлов П.К. В сердце Азии. (Памяти Н.М. Пржевальского). Очерк П.К. Козлова с 29 рисунками и портретами в тексте, 2 картами в красках и картой путешествия Н.М. Пржевальского. СПб., 1914. Republished in 1928.

<sup>37</sup> Козлов П.К. Монголо-Тибетская экспедиция 1923-1926. Краткий очерк о Монголо-Тибетской экспедиции Государственного русского географического общества 1923-1926 гг. Л., 1928.

<sup>38</sup> Гумилев Л.Н. Старобурятская живопись. М., 1975.

<sup>39</sup> Гераимова К.М. Памятники эстетической мысли Востока: Тибетский канон пропорций. Улан-Удэ, 1971.

<sup>40</sup> Ригведа. Избранные гимны. М., 1972.



*Introduction to Zen Buddhism*<sup>41</sup> and *Zen Buddhism and the Japanese Buddhist*<sup>42</sup> and books of Lama Anagarika Govinda, published at the turn of the '50s-'60s.

To a certain degree, such literature was available in the 1960s, and became increasingly available later on, especially in the 1980s. Devotion to the Orient—to China, Japan, and India—was considered to be de rigueur in Moscow's intellectual circles, especially among artistic Bohemians. In this devotion to Oriental esoterism, Buddhism, and Yoga and this interest in the fine arts and literature was an element of opposition to the official ideology. Furthermore, religious exploration was extremely important for Nonconformists. Due to this Oriental take on the special significance for them, it was not considered to be exotica. Ironically, many people interested in Buddhism later turned to Christianity. This was connected with Soviet intellectuals' search for a new—and an alternative to the Communist ideological—basis for life, first and foremost spiritual. It is necessary to differentiate among creative practice and liking for Buddhism, Eastern philosophy, and esoterism among scientists and intellectuals. For artists, these books were not “guides” but generated a creative urge.

Unofficial Moscow art involves not only different generations but has also gone through several stages of evolution.<sup>43</sup>

The Bulldozer Exhibition in 1974 became an important event marking the beginning of a new stage in Nonconformism. In Moscow soon after, in 1976, a semi-official exhibition hall was opened in Malaya Gruzinskaya Street. It belonged to the Pictorial Section of the Municipal Committee of Graphic Artists, uniting the majority of Nonconformists. In those years, it was the only exhibition hall where artists who did not share the official art doctrine could show their paintings. At the turn of the 1970s and 1980s, the Pictorial Section organized several trips throughout the country for artists. As mentioned above, such trips were a traditional form of authorities' purposeful work with artists. Meticulous undertaking of such creative trips was also offered to semi-official artists from the Pictorial Sector of the City Committee of Graphic Artists.

In the case of the Pictorial Section in Malaya Gruzinskaya Street, there were trips to the Soviet East: to Altai, Buryatia, and Kirghizia in Russia's Far East. To a certain degree, it was resumption of the tradition of the 1920s and '30s. On the other hand, the trips reflected an interest in the Orient, which could be seen in art. In a similar way, the Union of Artists of the USSR organized trips to the Russian North, the Soviet Baltic Sea, and Siberia. But here, other areas dominated, which seems characteristic. Altai and Buryatia in the Far East were relatively new targets. Before the 1960s, few Moscow artists visited these lands. There were no sufficiently strong local art schools. In the period from 1960 to 1980, official artists also took many trips to these regions. But they generally produced paintings devoted to building works or genre pieces, such as landscapes. But unofficial artists were attracted by the synthesis of nature and culture, by the “spirit of the place.”

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<sup>41</sup> D.T. Suzuki, *An Introduction to Zen Buddhism* (London, 1932).

<sup>42</sup> D.T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism and the Japanese Buddhist* (Tokyo, 1971).

<sup>43</sup> For more about the stages of evolution of Nonconformism, see: *Флорковская А.К. «Другое искусство». Эстетический плюрализм. Вехи и этапы // Русское искусство. №3. 2008. С 22-29.*

Let us consider some works by Nonconformists. The pictures I have chosen clearly reflect the theme of the Orient.

**Nicolay Vechtomov,**<sup>44</sup> after World War 2 in which he had taken part, made a trip to the Far East and the Kuril Islands. The trip resulted in landscapes and such works as “Signature of the Dragon” (1961), in which Vechtomov tried to follow the style, language, and content of Chinese art.

**001** Vechtomov N. Signature of Dragon. 1960



As stated above, most popular in the USSR was Chinese art, so it is not surprising that Vechtomov, trying to stretch beyond the limits of Socialist realism turned to Chinese tradition. Identification of the Orient with the spiritual has roots in Russian culture up to the Silver Age. Nonconformism, having appeared in the “thaw” that turned out to be more a cultural than a political event, continued with the interrupted tradition of the Silver Age.

“Signature of the Dragon” was experimental work for the artist. It was made on cardboard, at one stretch, rapidly, trying to follow Chinese methods. It was important for Vechtomov to recreate the method and shape of a foreign cultural mentality, to go beyond the scope of artistic techniques.

In 1977, the Municipal Committee of Graphic Artists sent Vechtomov to Kirghizia. After that, he again painted landscapes of the Kuriles, “Guards of Kunashir” for example (1977). Later, his deepening insight into the special nature of the Orient gave him a mediating role, and his works became more plastic with emotional tones, for example, “Sea World” (1987) and “Meditation” (1990). The acute plasticity of these works cannot be found in any one particular example; they only display Vechtomov’s notion of Japanese motifs and style. On the other hand, laconism and color purity is a distinctive feature of his artistic expression as a whole. He used the same

**002** Vechtomov N. Guards of Kunashir. 1979



**003** Vechtomov N. Meditation. 1990



<sup>44</sup> Кусков С. Николай Вечтомов. Париж-Москва-Нью-Йорк: Третья волна, 1997.

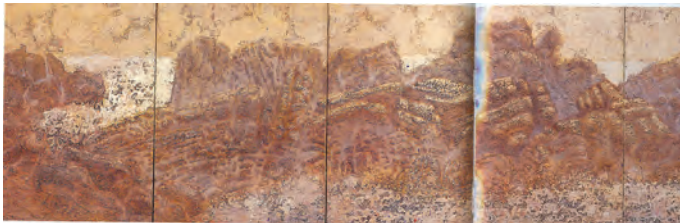
technique in creating works that deal with the Cosmos and old Russian architecture, but they are not as fine.

Ties between Vechtomov and the Far East were very firm. In 1995, a personal exhibition of Vechtomov was held in the Khabarovsk Far Eastern Art Museum. The artist was very engaged in the theme of space. For many artists who tackled the theme of space (the first space flight made by Gagarin in 1961, generating national interest in space, should be remembered), interest in the Orient was also characteristic to some extent or another. Also, it is rooted in the traditions of the 1920s and 1930s and had connections with the art of the Amaravella group. They were followers of N. Rerih and K. Tsiolkovsky. For Amaravella, the theme of the Cosmos is nearly always associated with the Orient. But this theme is separate and I will not explore it further here.

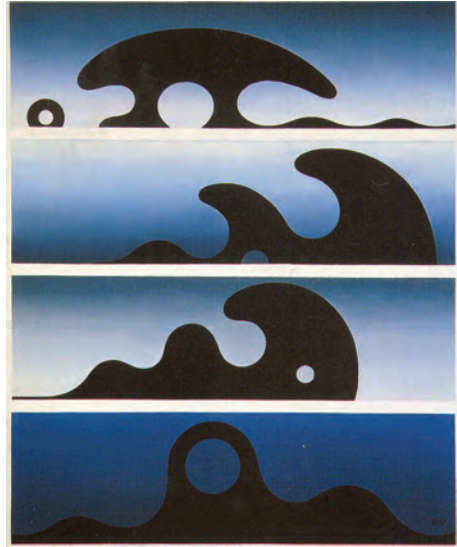
The works of **Dmitry Plavinsky**, opposite to Vechtomov, are closer to the next generation. The sphere of his artistic reflection is broader. Plavinsky's interest in Far Eastern art was expressed in 1950 as a panel painting, "Rocks in the Sea of Japan," made in the form of a traditional Japanese folding screen, but with an unusual sculpturesque texture. The artist used sand, powdering it onto a damp coat of color and then a second coat of color (this is typical of David Burl'uk's paintings). Japanese motifs appear here, reminiscent of the Silver Age. It is known that Russian and European Art Nouveau are strongly influenced by Japanese art. This includes motifs, styles, and methods of interpretation of visual impressions.<sup>45</sup> Plavinsky treats his canvas as a picture, combining several traditional motifs of Oriental art: sea, stones, waves, and of course, the Oriental screen.

The *Chinese Landscape* drawings by Plavinsky range from drawings of Russian village houses and abandoned churches to medieval European cathedrals and Viking boats.

**005** Plavinsky D. Rocks in the Sea of Japan. 1957-89



**004** Vechtomov N. Sea World. 1987



**006** Plavinsky D. Chinese Landscape. 1969



<sup>45</sup> Николаева Н.С. Япония-Европа. Диалог в искусстве. Середина XVI- начало XX века. М.: Изобразительное искусство, 1996. С. 328- 374.

Such a multicultural approach proclaims him to be a postmodern artist. His *Chinese Landscape* can only conditionally be called Chinese. It is his idea of “Chinese style,” with attention given to natural detail (leaves, cobwebs, and so on) and ability to impart inner completeness and harmony of the smallest pieces of reality and express the secret scale of the universe. This is what the Oriental master does in the opinion of the Russian artist. The difference between the Oriental and European view is, for Plavinsky, an ability to see the general in the particular. On the other hand, Plavinsky imitates the delicate graphics and monochromaticity of Chinese art.

According to the artist, his painting “Screaming Fish” (1960) opened in his creative activity a new theme of fishes, turtles, lizards, beetles, spiders, and butterflies. The world of insects first appeared in European art in the Modern era; it was inspired by the spirit of Japanese art and was attractive owing to its exoticism and formally sculptural novelty.

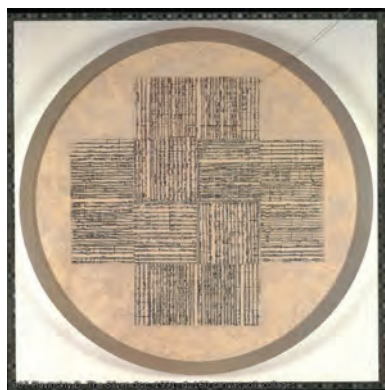
In 1958, Plavinsky went for the first time to Central Asia, visiting Samarkand and Tashkent. He then made a trip to Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenia, visiting Hiva, Lake Issyk Kul, Konye-Urgench, and Old Nisa. He was attracted by old cemeteries and saint places connected with hermits. In Central Asia in regard to both Islam and Buddhism, the artist wrote notes.<sup>46</sup> He said: “Asia has a huge place in my soul and work. So I write a lot on this theme in my notes.” His Central Asian impression was embodied in his works devoted to the “Asian theme” comprising *The Skull and the Koran* series and other paintings. Works from this series were made on sheets from an old Uzbek astrological book, which he got through his adventures in Samarkand in 1957.

His work “The Silver Disc” (1991) painted using the collage technique has generated interest. The artist wrote about the origin of the idea: “In Dagestani auls, on the walls of mosques and cross tombstones, I came across a mystic symbol that struck me—an inscribed swastika.... Creative works by Bach, having reached the peak of sacred music in substance, arrived at their highest destination.... Working with the published music of Bach's *Brandenburg Concertos*, I turned to the symbol of the inscribed swastika: it carried the idea of movement brought to a standstill and the

initiation of new movement.”<sup>47</sup> In Plavinsky’s creative works, Russian relics of the past, European cultural myths, and the “spirit of the Orient” are fused together through poetry, art, and philosophy.

The next generation, the Seventies, saw the formation of a group of “twenty Moscow artists” in the Municipal Committee in Malaya Gruzinskaya Street.<sup>48</sup> Almost all of them had been to Kirghizia, Buryatia, Altai, the Far East, and Central Asia. Their ties with nature aroused their desire to understand the philosophy, culture, and religion of the Orient. These artists felt keenly the position of Russia between Europe and Asia.

007 Plavinskiy D. The Silver Disc. 1991



<sup>46</sup> Плавинский Д. Записки о прошлом // Наше наследие. 1991. № 5 (23).

<sup>47</sup> Плавинский Д. Галерея «Дом Нащокина». Каталог выставки. М., 1995.

<sup>48</sup> Флорковская А.К. Малая Грузинская, 28. М.: Памятники исторической мысли, 2009.

008 Kurkin A. Old Osh. 1977



**Alexander Kurkin** in 1978 undertook a trip to Kirghizia. In his painting “Old Osh” (Osh is one of the oldest cities in Kirghizia), emotional, drawling Oriental rhythms are expressed through the world of things, such as craquelure canvases designed to look like the visible signs of time. In those years, Kurkin was also interested in the art of the native peoples of Chukotka.

**Sergey Zemlyakov**, having returned from his Altai trip, undertook a work entitled “Memory of Kosh-Agach” (Kosh-Agach is an ancient settlement). Being a representative of V. Sitnikov’s school (an unofficial art school in Moscow in the ’60s and ’70s), he expressed his feelings about the Orient on the level of emotions and moods and composition and color.

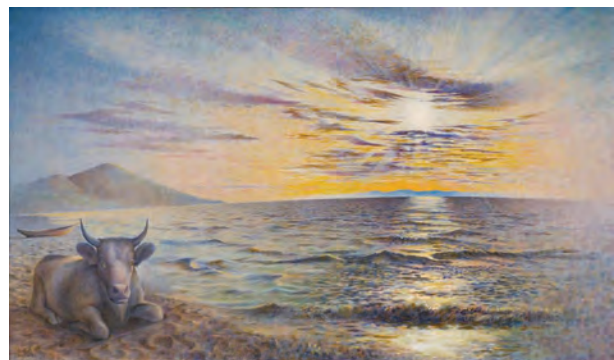
**Vladimir Petrov-Gladky**, traveling in Buryatia, found himself on the shore of Lake Baikal, which staggered his

imagination. The name of his painting is “The Glorious Sea—Sacred Baikal”; these words are from an old Russian song, which seems to bring us back to the events of the early twentieth century, with Russian presence in these territories. On the other hand, the image of a bull appears in the picture as a reminder of the ancient myth—the rape of Europa.<sup>49</sup> Developing the theme of East and West, the Seventies managed to see it from an original point of view. They were precursors of a new cultural model, where the global world is “torn to pieces” by regional forces and cultural unification resists intense seeking of national identification. Note that later, Oriental motifs do not appear in the artist’s paintings and graphics. He is closer to the European cultural myth. The Oriental part of his soul becomes apparent through rich, sophisticated, ornamental patterns. Sometimes all the shapes in his works are made of patterns.

009 Zemlyakov S. Memory of Kosh-Agach. 1983.



010 Petrov-Gladky Vladimir. The Glorious Sea - Sacred Baikal. 1976

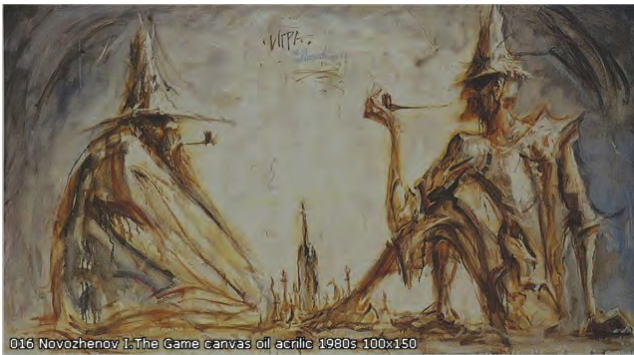


<sup>49</sup> Interview with the artist, April 1, 2010.

011 Gordeev D. At Dushanbe`s Bazaar. 1979



012 Novozhenov I. The Game. 1980s.



**Dmitriy Gordeev**'s painting "At Dushanbe's Bazaar" presents an image of the Orient through the eyes of a tourist in an ironic way. The artist is attracted not only by domestic exotic aspects, but the theme of collision of different cultures. I doubt whether this view of life in the national republic will appear in official art when friendship among Socialist republics is declared. It would be taken for parody.

**Ivan Novozhenov** in his painting "The Game" (1980) connects the aura of Buddhism with images of European culture such as Don Quixote. Don Quixote is playing dice with someone, reminding the Russian artist and audience of a Buddhist monk by outline and dress—symbolizing the "Oriental spirit" just as Don

Quixote symbolizes the "European spirit." But for the artist, Don Quixote is associated with *him*. Don Quixote is *his* alter ego. But who is this monk-wanderer? Don Quixote's subconscious? B. Groys wrote about Russia as the West's subconscious,<sup>50</sup> or maybe the East is Russia's subconscious?

When traveling in the Altai region, **Konstantin Kuznetsov** was struck by new-for-him nature and the unusual colors of earth and sky. Small, high-mountain clouds reminded him of the clouds in Chinese pictorial art. He saw in them not a decorative technique but a natural phenomenon. The artist made many drawings of mountains from nature. Later, having the dream of synthesizing Russian, European, and Chinese art, he studied a Chinese manual of painting entitled *The Mustard Seed Garden*. He is concerned about the synthesis of culture, natural forces, and human personality.<sup>51</sup> Kuznetsov was interested in Chinese painting for different reasons. The first was satiety with European art. It was essential to find new ways. The second was that Chinese painting attracted him with its special style of performance: with blows, not dabs, intelligent touches of a brush on a surface. It was made to reproduce energy, making the image unique and individual. The

<sup>50</sup> Гройс Б. Россия как подсознание Запада. В кн. Утопия и обмен. М.: Знак, 1993. С. 245-259.

<sup>51</sup> Слово о живописи из Сада с горчичное зерно. Перевод Е.В.Завадская. М.: Наука, 1969.

013 Kuznetsov K. Flowers. 1982



014 Kuznetsov K. The Antler. 1984



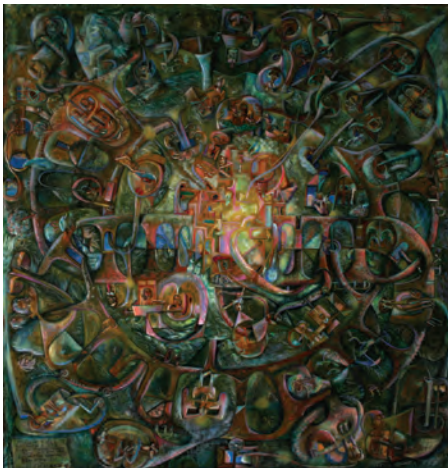
third was that it seemed to him that rules of creating pictures looked like a canon for icon-painting.

Chinese painting helped Russian artists to return to their native traditions.<sup>52</sup>

**Sergey Potapov** began to study Buddhist icons. He painted a series of works on oilcloth (1970s), where he synthesized images and forms of Buddhist icons, ancient Russian icons, and folk pictorial art—*lubok* (a cheap popular print). Potapov uses the motif of the mandala, and a whole cycle is painted in such a way that it is necessary to walk around each work, because they have neither top nor bottom. A pass-through theme in the series was “the wandering soul” in its Christian, Buddhist, and Russian folk meaning. The artist often combines religious symbols with images of Soviet reality. Potapov was one of the participants of performances in the Moscow Skryabin Museum (1971-1975), where a strong influence of Oriental esotericism can be traced.

One of the studio members, Valeriy Martinov, who even in the 1970s was a master of Eastern martial arts, was ordained and aspired to show ideas of esoterism in his dancing. In 1974, in the

015 Potapov S. The Island of Hope. 1973



016 Potapov S. Rivers and Bridges of Time. 1976



<sup>52</sup> Interview with the artist April 10, 2010.

Bahruschin Theatrical Museum, this group celebrated the centenary of N. Rerih. They conducted performance art closely connected with the theme of the Orient. This action was surely semi-official.<sup>53</sup>

Potapov, studying in Stroganov Moscow State University of Arts and Industry in 1965-1970 was a student of architect Henrich Ludwig.<sup>54</sup> In 1967-1969, Potapov attended his course “Hermeneutics of Symbols.” Ludwig visited the East, worked as an architect in Turkey, and passed the way of Herodotus and part of the Silk Road. He studied signs and world symbols, including those in Buddhism, and wrote a book on world symbols in the 1920s. It remained as a manuscript. Ludwig showed his students photos he took in the East. He was interested in the energy of temple architecture. He regards the temple, the person, and the Cosmos as a single whole. So Potapov was attracted to esoterism, which was Eastern in the first place.

It should be noted that the 1970s was a time of total liking for Eastern esoterism, including Sufism, Buddhism, and the books of Elena Blavatskaya. The older generation was a mediator of important information. Intellectuals who were interested in Eastern esoterism gathered in underground groups. They were enthusiasts including representatives of scientific and humanistic intelligentsia, artists, and actors.

Potapov studied books on Buddhist art—Indian and more Tibetan. Besides the above listed, there were English art albums that could be found in the Moscow Library of Foreign Literature. According to Potapov, he as artist was interested in visually rich albums with little text, so he could acquire obvious information on color symbolism and iconography in Buddhist icons. Information about the Buddhist Canon he took from Gumil’ov’s book *Old Buryat paintings*.

Potapov was acquainted with Buryats and Russians who gathered around Buddhist religious figures and Buddhologist B. Dandaron. He issued books and articles dealing with Buddhism.<sup>55</sup> Dandaron gathered followers from Moscow, Leningrad, Vilnius, and Tartu. He regularly conducted archaeological expeditions to Buryatia. In 1972, Dandaron was accused of organizing a “Buddhist sect,” in response to a celebrated anti-Buddhist case, which involved many famous Orientalists. As a result, Dandaron was imprisoned and died in 1974.

Potapov’s friends, the Buryats, lived, as he said, in “vital Buddhism,” and were carriers of a delicate culture. They bettered his technical skills in meditation in the 1970s. Potapov also communicated with Boris Smirnov-Rusetskiy, a member of Amaravella, and met with Svjatoslav Rerih in 1975 when Rerih visited the USSR. So Potapov became interested in Agni Yoga (“living ethics”).<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> *Флорковская А.К.* Перформансы в музее Скрябина. (1971-1975) // Русское искусство. XX век. Исследования и публикации. Кн. 3. М.: Наука, 2009. С. 494-508.

<sup>54</sup> *Хан-Магомедов С.О.* Генрих Людвиг. М.: Фонд «Русский авангард», 2007.

<sup>55</sup> *Дандарон Б.Д.* Описание тибетских рукописей и ксилографов Бурятского комплексного научно-исследовательского института. Вып. 1-2. М.: Восточная литература, 1960.; several articles were published in periodicals of Tartu University, which was at that time one of few strongholds of independent views in the USSR. See: *Дандарон Б.Д.* Элементы зависимого происхождения по тибетским источникам // Труды по востоковедению. Т.1. Тарту, 1968. С. 213-233.; *Дандарон Б.Д.* Содержание мантры ОМ-МАНИ-ПАД-МЭ-ХУМ // Труды по востоковедению. Т. 1. Тарту, 1973. С. 463-477.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with the artist, January 1, 2010.



Among artists also interested in Buddhism and esoterism we must note Yriy Sobolev. It was Yriy who gave Potapov books on the Tantra. Potapov was interested in visual aspects that is, tantric philosophy in art. Copies of books on the Tantra (which were forbidden) were circulated within narrow circles of “devoted” people.

Also very popular were some translations from English Hindu books.<sup>57</sup> In Potapov’s judgment, the visual iconography of Buddhism mainly developed in Tibet and then in Buryatia. So the focus for him was Buddhism as religious teaching, although he turned to Christianity in 1975.

Artists closely connected with Sobolev (I. Kabakov, V. Pivovarov, E. Schteinberg, and V. Yankilevskiy) at the beginning of the 1970s related to a group of philosophers made up of Evgeny Shiffers, Oleg Genisaretsky, and George Chedrovitsky were also associated with the theme of Oriental esoterism. However, conceptualists did not mention Eastern influence, which we can read in the biographies of European artists. Ilya Kabakov indicates that his understanding of “void” was connected with experience in assimilation of Russian avant-gardism.<sup>58</sup> Generally speaking, it is typical for Russian artists to understand their works only in a Russian and Western context. But study of the Oriental, perhaps Buddhist, influence on their art is a separate theme.

Like many other people, Potapov was interested in the Cosmos. He understood it as part of one whole—“Cosmos – person”—where person stands for microcosm. As for other generations, the connection between East and West was obvious for him, and he liked the philosophy of N. Hartmann and A. Schopenhauer. He felt a deep association between Buddhism, Cabbala, and Christianity. It is interesting he did not visit even the Soviet East, holding the philosophical doctrine that every person contains the whole world and movements in space could even be dangerous. Potapov says his works are partly the results of meditation. In one of his works *Neither Samsara Nor Nirvana* (1974), color symbolism is based on Buddhist symbolism. Yellow, white, red, and green are symbols of Buddha’s different incarnations and the four corners of the Earth.

There were artists for whom the Orient had become a decorative or emotional “stroke” dealt by their works, an additional bright tuning fork.

**Vitaliy Savelyev** painted abstract watercolors reminiscent of Chinese landscapes (1970-1980s), and **Victor Kasarin** in his “Dog” (1986) fantasizes around the theme of the hieroglyph and likens an image or a picture to a grapheme. A liking for visual modes of hieroglyphy and its stylistic ease and an understanding of the relations between plasticity and meaning were important for Russian and European artists. But they understood its depth to varying degrees. Kasarin’s work shows a strong liking for hieroglyphy in Russia and it seems to make it simple to imitate it. But Kasarin tries to find within signs the objects that are meant; he tries to stylize the shape.

Thus, deepening of the inner content-richness of art and expansion of the temporal and cultural range is characteristic of circles of unofficial artists. The Orient was a well from which

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<sup>57</sup> Gaurin Matt Shastri, *World and Meaning* (Calcutta, 1959); *The Cult of Tara: Magic and Ritual in Tibet* (University of California Press, 1978); Pradhupada Svami, *Shrimat-Bhagavatam* (New York; London; Los-Angeles; Bombay, 1972).

<sup>58</sup> For example: *Кабаков И. Гройс Б. Диалоги.* (1990-1994). М.: Ad Marginem, 1999. С. 100.

much could be drawn. During the period under consideration, the geography of the Orient expanded both spatially and culturally. Foreign countries, permitted to official artists, which was a source of vivid natural experience, were on the other hand forbidden to unofficial artists. They were more attracted by Chinese and Japanese art (even after the rupture of diplomatic relations between the USSR and China).

The area of the “Inner East” also expanded. Archaics of Altai, Kirghizia, and Buryatia were added to the familiar Central Asian and Caucasian cultures. The Orient, as realized by the artists, is a spiritual value, especially when depicting nature. And thus, Orientalism becomes a spiritual sanctuary, a niche in which to shelter from the Communist ideology. The “spirit of the East,” along with other sources of inspiration, defined the specificity of Russian art for a few decades. At that time, the spatial and cultural diversity of the world and our own country was rediscovered and made actual. The creative pluralism and esthetic eclecticism of the coming postmodernism had become the ground on which the Orientalism of Russian Nonconformist artists of the 1960-1980s flourished.

**017** Savelyev V. Incursion. 1980s.



**018** Kasarin V. A Dog. 1986

