

Friends of Nukus Museum



Quarterly Newsletter No. 12

April, 2010

1. This Newsletter is devoted almost entirely to another important event in the life of the Nukus Museum—the opening on May 18 of an exciting new exhibition of graphics and paintings by the *Amaravella* group of *cosmist* artists. The Savitsky Collection includes about 175 works created by this extraordinary group during the mid- to late-1920s, whose achievements—apart from two early exhibitions in New York (1927) and Chicago (1928)—remained little known in the West until after the breakup of the Soviet Union. The exhibition, which features 79 graphics and 8 oil paintings—including several recently restored and most on public view for the first time—is curated by Valentina Sychyova, the Museum’s Chief Curator since 1974. It will continue through mid-November.

2. Piotr Fateev, a 32-year old painter, founded the group, initially known as the *Kvadriga*, in 1922. Its core membership included Viktor Chernovolenko, Aleksandr Sardan, Sergei Shigolev, Boris Smirnov-Rusetsky, and Vera Pshesetskaya. In 1927-28, they formally constituted themselves as the *Amaravella* group. The name *Amaravella*, apparently coined by Sardan, derives from a Sanskrit word meaning ‘bearing light’ or ‘creative energy’.

3. *Cosmism* (from the Greek *cosmos*, meaning universe) was a body of philosophical thought in early 20th century Russia about the evolution of humanity and the universe and the relationship between the two. It influenced many well known Russian intellectuals, including architects, artists, poets, scientists, writers and, after the October 1917 revolution, Bolshevik ideologues. Its intellectual foundations were a *mélange* of Eastern and Western philosophical traditions, theosophy, pan-Slavism, and Russian Orthodox thinking that stemmed *inter alia* from the writings of Nikolai Fedorovich Federov, an eccentric 19th century philosopher whose works influenced many, including Dostoevsky, Gorki, and Tolstoy. One key aspect of Federov’s “philosophy of the common task” was his

call for a restructuring or reformation of human society and its natural environment, *i.e.* not only the earth but the entire universe—a notion that resonated deeply with post-revolutionary scientific and technical intelligentsia who, inspired by Bolshevik aspirations to remake the social universe, were also interested in remaking the natural one. Cosmism also advocated the view that the universe was ‘self-contained’ and ‘uncreated’ and that, as a result, knowledge and understanding could be gained only through scientific inquiry, not spiritual insight. Its practitioners employed both theoretical inquiry and empirical research to explore the history and philosophy of the origin, evolution, and future of the universe and human society.

4. Against this background, the *Amaravella* group of *cosmist* artists represents the idealistic or romantic tendencies of the Russian *avant-garde*. Their expectation of a complete restructuring or reformation of human society and its natural environment—in the wake of the October 17 revolution—reflected the intellectual climate of the time, summarized by its founder, Piotr Fateev, as follows: “. . . *New music, new philosophy, and the latest movements in painting—Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism—as well as Indian yoga, theosophy, and the newest scientific investigations—all this unfolds due to what is called a new cosmic conscience.*” The left wing *avant-garde* wanted to build a new functional world in the empty space left by the disappearance of the old forms of culture and religion. The metaphysical *avant-garde*, on the other hand, sought to achieve a reform of artistic and spiritual ideas and practices by means of a new relationship with the absolute. Like their friends Kandinsky and Malevich, the *cosmists* also explored the possibilities of abstract art to develop a new dimension in painting.

5. The *Amaravella* group, which operated as a commune, explored a wide range of approaches to art based on their members’ often vague and contradictory

philosophical ideas about cosmic harmony. While they advocated a universal and cosmic consciousness to life and art—and aimed to combine the most modern aspects of both art and science—their works often reflected deeply national influences, such as medieval Russian art, and their philosophy followed the tradition of a Russian nationalist approach to the cosmos. The group exhibited their works several times, including in New York and Chicago, when six of Sardan's paintings were displayed at an exhibition organized by the Russian *avant-garde* artist Nikolai Roerich.

6. Unfortunately, the Amaravella group's fame and fortune were short-lived. Their last exhibition took place in Moscow in 1929 and, starting 1930, they were all, except Fateev, arrested, exiled, or sent to labor camps. Pshesetskaya never returned nor was she rehabilitated and she is believed to have died in around 1945-46. Smirnov-Rusetsky was rehabilitated in 1956, as was Fateev himself in 1966, when low key exhibitions of Amaravella artists were resumed in Russia. Meanwhile, Amaravella artists' works are scattered far and wide—at the Museum of Cosmonautics, the Museum of Art of Eastern Peoples, at other museums throughout Russia, and several private collections.

7. By coincidence, a 2nd exhibition of works by the Amaravella group—*Cosmos of the Russian Avant-Garde: Art and Space Exploration, 1900-1930*—will open at the Fundación Marcelino Botín in Santander, Spain on June 24 and will continue through end-September. Curated *inter alia* by Dr. John Bowlit (University of Southern California), the exhibition will examine the relationship between Russian art and science, especially just before and just after the October Revolution of 1917. More specifically, it will focus on the links between aesthetic visions of the cosmos represented by artists such as Malevich and Nikritin and astrophysical research into space travel by then contemporary scientists such as Tsiolkovsky. It will comprise about 90 graphics and paintings from numerous sources in Russia and Europe, including from the famous Museum of Thessalonica.

8. There follows below brief biographical sketches of the five most prominent members of the Amaravella group, together with typical samples of their work.

- **Pyotr Fateev (1891-1971)** graduated from the Komissarov Vocational School in 1910 and from

1915 studied at the Art Studio under F. Rerberg. The spiritual content of his work was inspired by Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*, by his study of theosophy, and by the idea of human potential. Fateev believed that, in time, humans would travel to, and live in outer space. Following the Amaravella group's repression in the 1930s, he lived in virtual isolation until 1966, when an exhibition of his works at the Moscow Power Engineering Institute signaled his partial rehabilitation.



Sketch of Composition, 1917

- **Alexander Sardan (1901-74)**, born in Moscow, was both an artist and a musician, creating works that combined sound, painting, and architecture. Paintings such as *Sound in Space* (below) represent the 'sound' of architecture with vivid, colorful hues suggesting a cosmic—aural and visual—harmony. Sardan was also interested in astronomy, geology, physics, and psychology, although his real passion was cosmology. Following a brief imprisonment, Sardan gave up painting and became a well-known producer of popular scientific films.



Sound in Space, 1920

- **Boris Smirnov-Rusetsky (1905-93)**, after failing to gain entrance to the VKHUTEIN (Higher Art Technical Institute), attended the Moscow Institute of Engineering and Economy from 1921-26 and studied art simultaneously at I.Rerberg’s studio. During 1922-24, he created a series of landscapes entitled *Transparency* that were influenced by the poetry of Blok and the music of Chopin, Liszt, and Schuman. He finally entered the VKHUTEIN in 1926 and in 1927 two of his paintings were shown at the New York exhibition organized by Nikolai Roerich. Following the Amaravella group’s repression, he left the VKHUTEIN in 1930 and became a post-graduate student at the Institute of Metals, which determined the direction of his later career, although he continued to paint. He also traveled extensively throughout the



Buddha of Evening Light, 1924

Soviet Union. In 1941, he was arrested and sentenced to 10 years in labor camps. In 1956, he was rehabilitated.

- **Vera Pshesetskaya**—very little is known about her life and only five of her paintings remain—the rest were either lost or destroyed. Smirnov-Rusetsky said of her that “. . . it seemed as if she was sent to us by some Supreme Will to unite and consolidate our group and to complete our research with a deeper sense.” In 1930, Pshesetskaya was arrested and exiled to Arkhangelsk



Portrait of Sardan, 1928

where, according to Smirnov-Rusetsky, she died around 1945-1946.

- **Sergei Shigolev (1895-1951)** graduated from Vladimir Real School and from 1918-20 worked at its Museum of Natural History. In 1920, he entered Moscow University, where from 1921-23 he attended Shalyapin’s Theatre Studio and, besides working as an actor, also made sketches of masks, costumes and theatrical characters. After joining the Amaravella group in 1927, he participated in their exhibitions in New York and Chicago and in their final exhibition in Moscow in 1929. In 1933, he began to make animated cartoons.



Sun, 1927

Other News from and about Nukus

9. **Karakalpakstan.org**—is the address of a new website recently created by FoNM Treasurer Richard Dion designed to help local service providers promote Karakalpakstan as a *niche* cultural and environmental tourism destination. It is one of the outcomes of a 2-day “action planning” workshop organized by Richard at the Nukus Museum last November that brought together about 25 representatives of hotels, B&Bs, travel agents, museums, and *Uzbeksturism*. Paralleling a similar initiative in Semey (formerly Semipalatinsk) in East Kazakhstan—where the Soviet Union’s nuclear testing took place—**karakalpakstan.org**, which includes sections on the region’s history, things to do, sleeping, eating, and travel to and from, illustrates three simple, albeit not always well recognized points: (a) that even in otherwise unpromising, off-the-beaten-track regions affected by natural or man-made disasters, such as Karakalpakstan or East Kazakhstan, there are cultural relics, sites or associations that merit visits by interested tourists; (b) that these cultural relics and sites, if properly supported by the minimal food and accommodation infrastructure expected by tourists and visitors, can become growth points for the region’s economic and social development; and (c) that low cost investments in advertising, marketing, and training activities and infrastructure can have very high returns.

10. **The Desert of Forbidden Art**—Fans of this film, featured in full in the last Newsletter, and visitors to its website¹ will be aware that, following its world and US première in Santa Barbara, CA last January, it has to date been screened at several film festivals in the United States including: San Jose, CA; Cleveland, OH; Madison, WI; Sonoma, CA; Atlanta, GA; Palm Beach, FL; Newport Beach, CA; and Costa Mesa, CA; and at overseas film festivals in Brazil (Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo), Israel (Tel Aviv) and China (Beijing—planned for June). Later in the year, additional closed screenings are tentatively planned in Lincoln, NB; New York, NY; New Brunswick, NJ (Rutgers University); and Washington, D.C.—in connection with Marinika’s planned visit to the United States in October—and, overseas towards end-2010, possibly in London. The additional interest in the Savitsky Collection generated by these screenings to audiences now numbering in the thousands will

hopefully translate in due course into increased support for the Nukus Museum directly.

11. **Museum Emergency.** Owing to exceptionally severe Nukus winter, the Museum suffered a major setback last February when the central heating system in its original old building froze, then broke down. Conditions deteriorated to the point that some of the Savitsky Collection’s most precious paintings were at serious risk of damage and the only practical solution was to close the old building and evacuate its most valuable contents to the new building, at least temporarily. This has now been done—the old building will remain closed probably for most of 2010—and Marinika is now trying to mobilize the extra-budgetary resources needed to repair/replace the system. Some funds, albeit insufficient, have been committed by the Karakalpakstan government; some assistance in kind has been promised by an oil company prospecting in the Aral Sea area; and, the Germany Embassy in Tashkent is also considering the Museum’s request for financial assistance. In this context, in addition to financing a modest upgrade of the Museum’s information technology facilities and the printing of souvenir postcards for sale in the Museum’s shop—as reported in the last Newsletter—the FoNM Board recently approved a co-financing grant of €1,000 for heating system repairs from 2009-10 membership dues.

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¹ www.DesertOfForbiddenArt.com