

Friends of Nukus Museum



Quarterly Newsletter No. 11

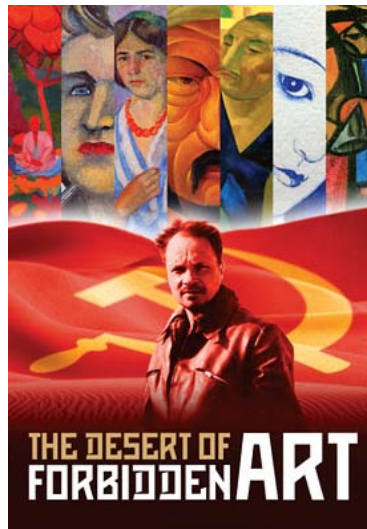
February, 2010

1. This Newsletter is devoted almost entirely to a major new event in the life of the Nukus Museum—the long-awaited and much anticipated completion of the film “*The Desert of Forbidden Art*” directed by FoNM member Amanda Pope and Tchavdar Georgiev (cf. Quarterly Newsletter No. 9). This is the first, full length (80 minutes), professionally made documentary about the life of Igor Savitsky and the history of the Museum. It was filmed on location in Russia and Uzbekistan and includes rarely seen images from Russian film and stills archives, interviews with art historians, artists, contemporaries and friends of Savitsky, especially with Marinika Babanazarova, and beautiful shots of selected paintings from the Collection—all in stunning high definition (HD). The film was formally premiered at the 25th Santa Barbara (California) International Film Festival earlier this month—and has so far been accepted at upcoming film festivals in San José (California), Cleveland (Ohio), and Madison (Wisconsin) as well as the 2010 New Zealand Documentary Film Festival in Dunedin and Wellington next month. For full details, FoNM members and readers of this Newsletter are invited to visit the film’s website—www.desertofforbiddenart.com.

2. Meanwhile, the following paragraphs replicate: (a) the film’s synopsis; (b) the film directors’ statement, describing why and how the film was made; (c) FAQ—frequently asked questions—about the film, and the directors’ answers; and (d) biographies of the film makers. In addition to public screenings at the above-mentioned film festivals, and hopefully at several still to be confirmed—e.g. Seattle, Edinburgh, London, and Prague—Amanda and Tchavdar together with the FoNM are planning additional presentations later this year in Europe, tentatively in Amsterdam, London, and Milan, and in the United States, including at the Biennial Symposium of the Textile Society of America in Lincoln, Nebraska, as well as in New York, Rutgers University, and Washington, D.C.

during Marinika’s planned visit in October, 2010. Dates and venues will be announced in due course.

3. **Synopsis¹.** How does art survive in a time of oppression? During the Soviet era, artists who stay true to their vision are sent to mental hospitals, labour camps, even executed. Their plight inspires Igor Savitsky. He pretends to buy state-approved art, but instead bravely rescues 40,000 works of forbidden fellow artists and creates a museum in the desert of Uzbekistan—far from the watchful eyes of the KGB. Though an impecunious artist himself, he cajoles the cash to pay for the art from the same authorities who are banning it, and amasses an eclectic mix of Russian *avant-garde* art. But his greatest discovery is a hitherto little known school of artists who settle in Uzbekistan after the Russian Revolution of 1917, encountering a unique Islamic culture as exotic to them as Tahiti was for Gauguin. They develop a startlingly original style, fusing European modernism with centuries-old Eastern traditions. Ben Kingsley, Sally Field and Ed Asner voice the diaries and letters of Igor Savitsky and the artists. Inter-mingling the recollections of the artists’ children and rare archival footage, the film traces a



dramatic journey of sacrifice for the sake of creative freedom. Described as “one of the most remarkable collections of 20th century Russian art” and located in one of the world’s poorest regions, these paintings are today worth millions—a potentially lucrative target for corrupt bureaucrats and art profiteers. The Savitsky Collection remains as endangered now as when he first created it, albeit for different reasons, implicitly posing the question whose responsibility is it to preserve this cultural treasure?

4. **Directors’ Statement.** “We were filming in Tashkent, just finishing a two year production on grassroots reformers in the former Soviet Union.

¹ This and subsequent paragraphs draw wholly or in part on material prepared for print and visual media use and are available in full on the film’s website.

Neither of us had ever been to Central Asia and tales of Uzbekistan's ancient Silk Road and the fabled blue-tiled domes of Samarkand—one of the ancient world's most dazzling capitals—sparked our interest. But then we were told of a cultural treasure from our own time—a museum of *avant-garde* art, forbidden during the Soviet Union, in a far off desert at the extreme western border of Uzbekistan. The improbability of the story was arresting: an amazing art collection, created single-handedly by one penniless man, in the desert, a poor region, in an environment suspicious of art created by their former colonizers. We have both been drawn to stories about stubborn, unsung people with vision who challenge the boundaries of their times. We first met as professor and student at University of Southern California's film school. Our partnership on an equal footing across generations might have seemed unlikely. But we complimented each other perfectly. Having grown up in the former USSR, Tchavdar had his roots in Eastern European and Russian culture, while Amanda's strength came from a background in teaching and making documentary films on art and the dynamics of creativity. What we discovered in the stories surrounding the Savitsky Collection was a constellation of indomitable idealists. First, there were the artists like Yevgeny Lysenko whose painting of the bull *Fascism Is Advancing* was labelled anti-Soviet. His creativity landed him in a mental hospital. Second, there was the original collector who defied a totalitarian regime and amassed 40,000 artworks for his museum often by giving IOU's, promising payment in 10 or 12 years. Finally, we met the current Museum director, Marinika Babanazarova, who has resisted government bureaucrats and art sharks as they tried to raid the prizes of the Collection. We realized we had the opportunity in this story to explore 80 years of an ever-changing relationship between the Islamic world and the West through the lens of artists who lived in these times. Unfortunately, due to political and economic conditions in Central Asia today, the Savitsky Collection could cease to exist in its present form at any time. We hope this film will function as an advocacy tool and a catalyst to protect this unique 20th century cultural institution”.

5. Frequently Asked Questions. The directors' answers to the six most frequently asked questions about the film (below) exemplify their utter personal and professional dedication, the artistic and practical challenges they faced, and their broader objectives and ambitions for the film—shared by the FoNM.

How many years did it take to do this film?

We started our research in 2003 and made our first filming trip to the Museum. We set out with a research grant from CEC Artslink, and then found ourselves continuing research in Russia and Central Asia. At the University of Southern California (USC), we formed an interdisciplinary team, won a prestigious Zumberge grant, then brought the current museum director to Los Angeles as a USC Provost's Distinguished Visitor. Painstakingly, we uncovered never before seen archival stills and film of Savitsky and his artists as well as period images of the times. Grants from the Open Society Institute, the National Endowment for the Arts, and others helped us along the way. We have just now finished the film—six years later, and we are just starting our outreach to help this endangered Collection.

Where did your explorations of the stories behind the collection take you?

We filmed not only at the Museum in Nukus, a city surrounded by desert in the far Western part of Uzbekistan, but also in the ancient cities of the old Silk Road—Samarkand, Khiva and Bukhara— where the artists lived. We followed Savitsky's path to the ruins of the Khorezm civilization, as important to Central Asia as Tutankhamen's tomb to Egypt. Here, he developed his taste for discovering and preserving art from vanishing cultures. Then we traced Savitsky's and the artists' lives back to Moscow and St. Petersburg. We spent days in the State Russian film and stills archives unearthing never before seen images from the Soviet era. We filmed in the State Tretyakov Gallery with curators who had known Savitsky and at the Zagorsk Monastery that was used as a prison for forbidden art under the Soviets. We found the children of the Savitsky Collection's artists, art historians and museum curators and elderly friends of Savitsky who had witnessed the repressions.

What were some of the creative challenges specific to this film?

Usually, in a historic documentary where the main characters are no longer alive, filmmakers rely on diaries and letters, but in our story this was barely possible. The Soviet regime was so repressive that no one kept diaries. Views on art and frustration about the lack of artistic freedom could not be written down. But they could be spoken about with trusted friends and family and here is where we lucked out. We found

the artists' children, themselves in their seventies and eighties, and other close friends who recounted conversations around the kitchen table about art and living as an artist during Soviet times. We were also missing images of ordinary life in Uzbekistan. We were thrilled to learn that the Soviets had sent one man, Max Penson, to Uzbekistan to document the Revolution. He worked for 'Pravda of the East', the main Communist newspaper of Central Asia. He was as passionate in his photographing of what became his second motherland as Savitsky was in his collecting. He took over 15,000 images of the historical, social, religious and political transformations that were taking place in the same period as the artists were painting. Thanks to his son, we were given full access to this collection by this Soviet Central Asian equivalent of Cartier Bresson, the father of modern photo-journalism. His images can be viewed at MAXPENSON.COM.

Why is this film relevant today?

Artists often are the 'canaries in the coal mine' identifying the darker elements in society. Repression always starts with silencing their voices. As artist Christo says, "A work of art is a scream of freedom." In our film, we have a generation of artists whose masterpieces came close to destruction and only through the efforts of Savitsky and his followers were saved. The film is both a cautionary tale and a hopeful one.

What was the most surprising thing you learned?

Even at the height of Soviet repressive policies there were people inside the government as well as ordinary folks who would act to protect what they believed in. Savitsky was able to start his museum with money from the most powerful politician in the region who acted against government policy. Even in Moscow, Ministry of Culture officials allowed Savitsky to take paintings from their so-called 'prison' for banned artworks.

What is your dream for the film?

Even though the museum houses a collection worth millions, government salaries for its staff average \$25 a month. This is just one example of the economic pressures on the museum. Most of the Savitsky Collection is in dire need of restoration. We hope that our film will serve as a catalyst to bring international attention to protect and preserve this 20th

century art treasure. The filmmakers are launching an advocacy campaign for screenings and distribution of the film involving museums, non-profit organizations and art lovers, both in the U.S. and abroad. As part of this effort, the filmmakers are working on creating the first book in English on the Savitsky Collection and also realizing efforts to bring exhibitions from the Collection to museums in Europe, the United States and Asia.



On location in Muynak, Karakalpakstan



On location in Russia

THE FILMMAKERS

AMANDA POPE (Director, Producer, Writer)

Amanda's directing, producing, writing, and editing credits over her more than 20 year long career include award-winning documentary, dramatic, and social advocacy programs. Her work has focused on the dynamics of creativity in fine art, public art happenings, urban design, theatre and dance. Her award-winning public television documentaries: *Jackson Pollock Portrait*, *Stages: Houseman Directs Lear*, and *Cities for People* have all been broadcast nationally on PBS. Most recently, she directed *The Legend Of Pancho Barnes And The Happy Bottom Riding Club* about a pioneer woman aviator. Her program series, *Faces Of Change*, documented grassroots reformers and emerging leaders in the former USSR. She has served on the Board of New York Women in Film, the Women in Film Foundation in Los Angeles, and has been a jury member for the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences student films, and the International Documentary Association's feature documentaries. Amanda is an Associate Professor in production at the University of Southern California's School of Cinematic Arts.



TCHAVDAR GEORGIEV (Director, Producer, Writer, Editor)

Tchavdar has produced, associate-produced or edited award-winning fiction and non-fiction films as well as TV programming for ABC, PBS, History Channel, National Geographic, Channel 1 Russia and MTV Russia. He was one of the editors on the documentary *We Live in Public* which won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance, and the feature *Bastards* which won the MTV Russia awards for best film. His editing credits include: National Geographic's *Alien Earths*, *Divining the Human: The Cathedral Tapestries of John Nava*, narrated by Edward James Olmos, *Marion's Triumph*, narrated by Debra Messing, *Maybe Baby*, *View from a Grain of Sand*, and *Refusenik*. He has cut commercials for Honda, Oscar de la Renta, Rooms to Go, Tele 2 Mobile Europe and MTV Russia. He directed a PSA for the 100th anniversary of the Santa Monica Pier and the documentary *Kosher Messiah* and worked with his mentor professor, Amanda Pope, as associate producer and editor on *Faces of Change* for the Eurasia Foundation filming grassroots reformers in the former USSR.

ALEXANDER DOLGIN (Cinematographer) Alexander has shot numerous documentary projects for Russian TV as well as PBS, ZDF and ARTE. His work on *Moscow Night Music* was awarded best cinematography at the Moscow film festival as well as Babelsberg and Marseilles. He was also honoured with the "Courtans D'Or" Award at the 9th festival of Russian Art and Cinema in Nice. His feature film experience includes *Ivan The Fool* and *First On The Moon*, both of whom were shown around the world in various film festivals. Alexander graduated from Moscow State Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in 1987. He is a member of the Russian Filmmakers Union.

GENNADI BALITSKI (Cinematographer) Gennadi Balitski photographed the award-winning *Lana's Rain* as well as a number of other independent feature films including *La Migra*, *Drive By*, *Once Upon a Time in the Hood* and *29 and Holding*. His cinematography in commercials includes work for Oscar de la Renta, Liz Claiborne, Ashley Furniture, Karastan and Rooms To Go. He has also worked as a producer for TELE 2 Europe and MTV Russia. His fashion photography clients include Cindy Crawford.

MIRIAM CUTLER (Composer) Miriam Cutler has been writing, producing and performing music for over 25 years and has an extensive background scoring for independent film, television and non-fiction. Her documentary credits include: *Ghosts of Abu Ghraib*, *Thin*, *Family Affair*, *The Fence*, *Chris and Don: A Love Story*, *China Blue*, *Absolute Wilson*, *Lost In La Mancha*, *Pandemic: Facing AIDS*, and many more. Additionally, she has served as an advisor for the Sundance Institute Documentary Composers Lab, as well as on documentary juries for the Sundance Film Festival, Independent Spirit Awards, International Documentary Association Awards, and American Film Institute's Film Festival Awards, and is on the Board of The Society of Composers and Lyricists. She is currently coproducing a documentary about an American elephant, which she will also score.

UNESCO/Tashkent that will enable the implementation of this project to resume next month (March, 2010).

FoNM Foundation News

6. Membership and contributions. As previously reported, 2008-09 membership dues totalling US\$5,000 financed the restoration of nine paintings by **Mikhail Nedbaylo, Nikolai Prokoshev, Mikhail Shemyakin, Nadejda Sveshnikova, Pavel Surikov** and **Alexander Volkov**, which now feature in the current exhibition of restored paintings reported in the last Newsletter. In 2009-10, we plan to match at least this level of contribution to the Museum and to finance *inter alia*: (a) a modest upgrade of the Museum's information technology facilities (desktop computer, laptop, and colour printer and broadband access to the internet); and (b) the printing of souvenir postcards—in addition to those produced last year—for sale in the Museum's shop. In the circumstances, we hope that those Friends who have not yet renewed their memberships for 2009-10 will respond promptly to this and a separate reminder now in the mail.

7. FoNM Outreach Activities. The main highlights of FoNM outreach activities during the final quarter of 2009 were:

- **Savitsky Collection Calendar 2010-2011.** Thanks to the generosity of two anonymous Friends, 400 copies of a two-year (2010-11) Nukus Savitsky Collection wall calendar—designed by NHA Associates and Silk Road Media—were printed in Turkey and delivered last December to the Museum (200), to Don Nicholson at the American Chamber of Commerce in Uzbekistan, Tashkent (100), and to David Pearce in Washington D.C. (100). The calendar can thus now be purchased in Nukus, Tashkent, and Washington for US\$15 (plus postage) or US\$12 for *bona fide* members of the FoNM.
- **Museum on Wheels.** As previously reported, a UNESCO-sponsored two month-long public fund-raising campaign in Switzerland, November-December, 2008, raised about US\$12,000 equivalent for this important community outreach project, originally funded by the British Council and later by Swiss (SECO) official development assistance. Earlier this month, the Museum signed an US\$8,000 grant agreement with

- **Karakalpakstan Cultural Tourism.** FoNM Treasurer Richard Dion conducted a 2-day “action planning” workshop at the Museum last November, attended by about 25 representatives of hotels, B&Bs, travel agents, museums, and Uzbekturism. The overall goal was to help local service providers promote Karakalpakstan as a ‘*niche*’ cultural and environmental tourism destination—as a worthy addition to the conventional Samarkand, Bukhara, Khiva tourist itinerary. More details, including a new website and photographs, in the next Newsletter!