
The Faking of the Russian Avant-Garde

With invented provenances, unreliable certificates of authenticity, and “rediscovered” works by artists who are lost to history, forgers are flooding galleries and auction houses with Russian avant-garde fakes. A six-month ARTnews investigation reveals that inauthentic works now outnumber authentic ones.

An exhibition of 192 Russian avant-garde paintings was shut down abruptly in March, three days before its scheduled closing, when a well-known art expert claimed that 190 of the works were fake. The exhibition, in the Château Museum in Tours, France, was devoted to Aleksandra Ekster, a major figure of the avant-garde. A native of Ukraine, Ekster (or Exter) settled in France in 1924 and lived there until her death, in 1949.

The whistle-blower was Andrei Nakov, who was himself at the center of a scandal in the 1980s, when he was accused of certifying more than 1,000 questionable pastels and drawings by another Russian avant-garde luminary, Mikhail Larionov. (Nakov sued the *Geneva Tribune* for its coverage of a traveling exhibition he organized of works attributed to Larionov and won the case when the court found that he did not knowingly promote fakes.)

The organizer of the Ekster show—and the owner of 130 of the paintings—was another well-known expert, the Paris dealer Jean Chauvelin. He told the French press he had bought the paintings in Russia 30 years ago. Chauvelin was not able to furnish the authorities with authentication certificates for the works, but there was no need for them, he said, because “*l’expert, c’est moi.*”

Nevertheless, the Office Central de lutte contre le trafic des Biens Culturels—the Central Office for Combatting Traffic in Cultural Goods—seized the paintings, which remain in police custody. A police spokesperson said that an investigation was in progress.

This wasn’t the first time a museum found itself embarrassed by allegedly fake Russian avant-garde pictures. Last year the Bunkamura Museum of Art in Tokyo removed five works attributed to Chagall, Kandinsky, and Ivan Puni from an exhibition lent by the Moscow Museum of Modern Art, although the Moscow museum insisted they were genuine.

A six-month *ARTnews* investigation and interviews with scholars, dealers, and other sources in the United States, Russia, Germany, France, and Spain reveals that the number of Russian avant-garde fakes on the market is so high that they far outnumber the authentic works. “There are more fakes than genuine pictures,” said Alla Rosenfeld, curator of the Norton Dodge Collection of Soviet Nonconformist Art at Rutgers University from 1992 to 2006 and former vice president of the Russian art department at Sotheby’s New York. It’s impossible to put a number on them, said Natalia Kournikova of Kournikova Gallery in Moscow, but “we can say that almost every artist whose prices have risen has become the victim of fake makers.”

Peter Aven, president of Alfa-Bank in Moscow and owner of one of the world’s best collections of Russian avant-garde art, called the quantity of fakes “colossal.” It affects the market, said Rosenfeld, “because people are becoming reluctant to acquire Russian works.” The situation has gotten worse since 1996, when *ARTnews* published its first article about

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Russian avant-garde fakes, according to Aleksandra Shatskikh, one of the world's leading scholars on the Russian avant-garde. "Russian buyers have entered the market, and the new demand has provoked a wave of fakes that is many times greater than the production of forgeries in the first half of the 1990s," she said.

Fake icons and "fauxbergé" trinkets have bedeviled the art market for generations, but the escalating demand for Russian art in the last two decades has led to more ingenious abuses. For a while, "Russified" pictures—minor 19th-century European landscapes or portraits doctored to look Russian—flooded galleries and antique dealerships in Moscow and made their way to the West, appearing even at major auctions. But it has been Russian modernism—art from the first three decades of the 20th century—that has attracted the most Western collectors and consequently the most forgeries.

Hundreds of works have appeared in recent years at auction houses and in galleries all over Europe, from Munich to Madrid. These works have very sketchy provenances in which certain assertions are repeated again and again: the works are said to have come from hitherto unknown private collections or to have been smuggled to Israel by immigrants in the '70s or to have been deaccessioned by provincial museums in the former Soviet republics—although this practice was strictly forbidden—or to have been confiscated and hidden for a half century by the former KGB (the secret police), although experts say there is not a single documented case of avant-garde works emerging from KGB vaults.

The Nagel auction house in Stuttgart, Germany, for example, at its Russian sale of April 26, 2007, offered six paintings from the collection of the late Baron Ciancio Villardita—a collection unknown to experts in Russian art. According to the auction catalogue, the baron acquired the paintings—by Natan Altman, David Burliuk, Natalia Goncharova, Ivan Kliun,

Boris Kustodiev, and Nadezhda Udaltsova—from a member of the Italian Communist Party during the '60s and early '70s. The party member, according to the catalogue, bought Altman's canvas from a Soviet functionary in 1938, when the Soviet Union was convulsed by Stalin's bloody purges, and foreign Communists—officials of the Communist International, or Comintern—lived in fear for their lives. All foreigners in Moscow were under close surveillance; it would have been quite a feat to buy a forbidden "formalist" painting, experts said.

The only information the auction house had about Baron Ciancio Villardita was that he died in the '90s. Was he the same Baron Ciancio Villardita who is mentioned in the deposition of Antonino Calderone, an underboss of the Sicilian Cosa Nostra who fled to France in 1983 and cooperated with the authorities? According to Calderone, Ciancio Villardita was a phony aristocrat who served as secretary for a member of the Italian parliament, collecting money from Sicilian mafiosi for the Christian Democratic Party.

Another group of seven works by important artists offered in the same sale came from the collection of Józef Kecsmár and Janos Kecsmár of Budapest, according to the catalogue. Budapest is a small city where people in the art world are very aware of one another's activities, but several members of Hungarian art circles—including Tamás Kieselbach, a leading art dealer and owner of the Kieselbach auction house—told *ARTnews* they had never heard of a Kecsmár collection.

A large number of Russian 19th-century and avant-garde works that have turned up in European auction houses have been certified by Russian art historians or institutions. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the major Russian state museums and conservation institutes—including the Tretyakov Gallery and the Grabar Restoration Center—went into the business of issuing certificates of authenticity.

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In 2004, however, a landscape advertised as a masterpiece by the famous Ivan Shishkin (1832–98) was put up for sale at Sotheby's London with an estimate of £700,000 (\$1.28 million), only to be unmasked as the work of the Dutch painter Marinus Koekkoek. The canvas had been purchased at Bukowskis auction house in Stockholm a year before for \$56,000, slightly repainted, given Shishkin's signature, and then certified by the Tretyakov Gallery's department of expertise. It was withdrawn the day before the auction.

In 2005 two dealers in Moscow, Tatiana and Igor Preobrazhensky, were arrested for selling Russified pictures (they have since been convicted and sentenced to prison), and it became public that hundreds of such pictures had been sold and that the Tretyakov Gallery, the Grabar Restoration Center, and other institutions had issued certificates for a number of them. An internal Tretyakov investigation established that 212 Russified paintings had been examined by the museum's department of expertise, which had recognized 116 of them as fraudulent and mistakenly certified 96 as genuine. In 2006 the Russian ministry of culture belatedly prohibited institutions under its control from being involved in the commercial certification of artworks. Yet European auction houses continue to sell paintings certified by the Tretyakov Gallery and other Russian institutions.

A number of prominent art historians who began their careers as academic scholars are authenticating Russian avant-garde works. According to Shatskikh and others, the authenticators often claim to be compiling catalogues raisonnés and promise to include the works they certify in future publications, which gives additional weight to their certificates. These documents are often short—a page or two stating that the work in question can be attributed to a certain artist. They rarely contain specific information about a work's genesis or detailed comparisons with other similar works by the artist.

Another device, Shatskikh said, is to reproduce questionable artworks in academic books. "This practice is connected to the laundering of fakes in exhibitions. The dubious works appear in exhibition catalogues prepared by serious museums, and sometimes find their way to the covers."

Considering the number of fakes and the sparseness of documentation, experts say, buyers should be cautious. Aven said he buys only works with "a 100 percent provenance. When sellers say they can't disclose the provenance of a work, I refuse to even discuss it." Unless a work has an "ironclad provenance or was reproduced and exhibited during the lifetime of the artist," Aven won't touch it.

Rosenfeld endorses that kind of caution. A good provenance, she said, means that a work can be traced back to the artist or the artist's family. It was "published in an old catalogue—new catalogues are not really proof—and there is documentary evidence, for example, a photo of the artist with the work in the background. But the combination of all of these—family, early documentation, exhibition during the artist's lifetime—that's very important. Strong documentary evidence that the work existed during the artist's lifetime."

Dmytro Horbachov, a well-known art historian in Kiev who claims expertise in the fields of Ukrainian and Russian modernism, has created a Web site on which he posts his attributions (www.keytoart.org.ua). Horbachov organized the exhibition "Crossroads: Modernism in Ukraine, 1910–1930," at the Chicago Cultural Center and the Ukrainian Museum in New York, in 2006.

Among the works Horbachov has certified as genuine is *Suprematic Composition*, attributed to Kazimir Malevich, which was included in the "Crossroads" show. The work was never reproduced during the artist's lifetime and is unsupported by documentary evidence. According to the technical

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analysis, it was painted in oil and tempera. Malevich experts say they know of no other use of tempera by Malevich in a Suprematist painting (he used it for fresco designs). But a photo of it is posted on Horbachov's Web site under the category "Attributed Works of Art" with the comment, "I assumed that this work painted by a sure hand and with a great mastery is an authentic Malevich."

A large group of unknown Eksters with unclear provenances have turned up on the art market in the last few years. Most have been certified by Chauvelin or Georgii Kovalenko of the State Institute of Art History in Moscow.

In April 2007 both Kovalenko and Horbachov participated in the conference "Ukrainian Modernism in Context, 1910–1930," organized by Harvard University's Ukrainian Research Institute, and they engaged in a heated exchange over a painting by Ekster that was in the "Crossroads" exhibition and is said by the catalogue to come from a private collection in Kirovograd, Ukraine. Kovalenko told the audience that he had never seen the painting. Whereupon Horbachov asserted that Kovalenko had told him he had gone to Amsterdam to see the work and had certified its authenticity before its sale to a private collector in Ukraine. Kovalenko changed his mind and admitted that he had seen it in reproduction.

Moscow art historian Svetlana Dzhafarova, who has certified many avant-garde works, was recently accused by Aven in the Moscow newspaper *Kommersant* of knowingly certifying fakes. Aven told *ARTnews* that in the early '90s he had bought a still life certified by Dzhafarova as an Altman. It was shown in the acclaimed 1995–96 "Berlin-Moscow/Moscow-Berlin 1900–1950" exhibition. However, when he was preparing the recently published catalogue of his collection, Aven said, he decided to have all his artworks analyzed. Lab tests showed that the still life attributed to Altman was painted during the '90s, he said.

"When Dzhafarova offered me this piece, she said that she knew which collection it belonged to, but she insisted that she couldn't disclose this information," Aven told *ARTnews*.

"It's a lie!" Dzhafarova responded. She said she had not sold anything to Aven. "I worked with Aven during the 'Moscow-Berlin' exhibition in 1995–96. During that time he exhibited a still life by Natan Altman, which he purchased. By the way, I can assure you that the still life is authentic," she said.

Aven and others charge that many of the Russian experts are involved in the sale of the works they authenticate. Shatskikh described the situation as "tragic." Unfortunately, she said, "art historians have not only proved to be unable to struggle with the forgers, some have become their accomplices." She made it clear she was describing the situation generally, not pointing a finger at anyone in particular.

Chauvelin said, "Kovalenko, my colleague in Moscow, who is also an expert on Ekster, asks €5,000 for a certificate. This is his right. But if you don't want to pay €5,000, you have no chance that a work will be recognized as an original." Kovalenko declined to talk to *ARTnews*. Chauvelin and Kovalenko are both preparing Ekster catalogues raisonnés.

A new organization of experts was formed in 2007 to authenticate Russian avant-garde works. Called the International Chamber of Russian Modernism, or InCoRM (www.incorm.eu), the group, which is based in Paris, consists of more than a dozen experts from Western Europe and Russia, including Chauvelin, Dzhafarova, Kovalenko, French scholar Nadia Filatoff, and German scholar Ariane M. Hofstetter. Its president is Patricia Railing, a British art historian. Paris resident Jacques Sayag was a member of the group but resigned after *ARTnews* interviewed him.

ARTnews interviewed Chauvelin in his art-filled Paris apartment not far from the Opera. He introduced himself by asking if the interviewer was aware that he was known to his colleagues as "the sharp eye."

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A former ballet dancer who was trained by Russian teachers, Chauvelin became an art dealer and an expert on a wide range of Russian avant-garde art. “I hope the new organization will be able to change the climate,” he said, “because the climate has become intolerable.”

Sayag, the former general secretary of the organization, said, “It is a group of experts who met and decided to work together because, before the establishment of InCoRM, everyone was working in his own corner and we had a lot of contradictory information.” Sayag described the market for Russian art as polluted. “Today, when you talk about the Russian avant-garde with collectors or even with simple art lovers, you get the impression that you’re offering them cocaine.”

“Of course the experts will receive money for their work,” Sayag said of InCoRM. “If you have a painting, you have to become a member of the organization and only after this can you show your painting to experts. We are talking about expertise, not about authentication. InCoRM will provide its opinion, positive or negative, only if four experts agree. The opinion will be provided in writing.”

This method of collective expertise was demonstrated in Nagel’s April 26, 2007, sale—the one that included works from the Ciancio Villardita collection. According to Sayag, Nagel “heard that we established InCoRM and they needed the names” of experts. Most of the lots were certified either by individual InCoRM members or by the group collectively. Of the 55 lots offered, 14 were certified by Chauvelin, Filatoff, Hofstetter, and Sayag. The artists—Altman, Ivan Bilibin, Ilya Chashnik, David Shterenberg, and Udaltsova, among them—represented a wide range of styles and schools.

Hofstetter, liaison officer of InCoRM, works for Nagel auction house and several German art galleries. In an e-mail, she described her work as “art historically advisory.” She earned an M.A. in art history with a thesis on a French medieval manuscript, but,

she wrote, has been “engaged with Russian Avant-garde art for quite a few years” and is working on a doctoral dissertation on Ivan Puni at Humboldt University in Berlin.

Hofstetter explained in an e-mail that she, Filatoff, and Sayag examined a number of paintings for Nagel’s April 26 sale. “As a team we have evaluated those works thoroughly and afterwards worked out detailed art historical reports composed of: 1. Analyses of material and technique by means of the visual descriptive method. 2. Stylistic analyses using a comparative method. 3. Art-historical classification. 4. Conclusion.” Hofstetter wanted to emphasize that “those reports have nothing in common with so called photo-expertises in the sense of judging a piece of art by a photo.” That “the reports done for Nagel were declared in the auction catalogue as photo-expertises was neither in our power nor in our interest,” she added.

Sayag, a former book dealer, stated repeatedly that he is not an expert on art and cannot tell a fake from an original. He said that he had never provided certificates to Nagel. “They showed me photographs and said, ‘Here are the certificates of people who already saw these paintings. What do you think about the subject of the painting?’ I wrote that if this work is attributed to Popova, I don’t think that it is not Popova. It was not me who established attributions,” he said.

Beate Kocher-Benzing, press manager at Nagel, said, “We didn’t have any contact with Mr. Sayag.” His name may have come into the catalogue through an expertise furnished by the consigner, she said. But certificates written and signed by Sayag for Nagel that were obtained by ARTnews do authenticate specific artworks; they do not merely endorse other people’s certifications.

One of the sale’s offerings was *Construction spatiale*, attributed to Popova by Chauvelin. It is very similar to a well-known painting in the Tretyakov Gallery called *Construction with White Crescent*,

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except that the forms in the Nagel painting seem to be upside down and a second crescent appears at the bottom of the composition. The Tretyakov picture was mistakenly reproduced upside down in the catalogue for Popova's exhibition in Moscow in 1990. The Nagel work didn't sell.

The Nagel sale also included three watercolors attributed to the architect Yakov Chernikhov and said to come from the collection of the family of Igor Borisovich in Saint Petersburg (Lots 640–642). None made its reserve. All were certified by Chauvelin. But Andrei Chernikhov, the architect's grandson and a recognized authority on his works, emphatically rejected all three. They "have nothing in common with Yakov Chernikhov," he said.

An expert who asked not to be identified pointed out that an unusually large number of the hitherto unknown works in the sale were very similar to known works. A portrait of the photographer Miron Sherling attributed to Yuri Annenkov by Chauvelin, Sayag, Filatoff, and Hofstetter (Lot 605) is a "variant" of the well-known work in the Russian Museum in Saint Petersburg, according to the catalogue, which illustrates both of them. It was sold for 200,000 (\$272,000). Other works also have "twins," but the catalogue doesn't mention them. Two works attributed by Chauvelin to Altman, *Nature morte* (Lot 609) and *Logan, Revolutionnaire* (Lot 610), are also very similar to pictures in the Russian Museum. They sold for 150,000 (\$204,000) and 80,000 (\$108,000) respectively. One of the Villardita pictures, *Nature morte au guéridon* (Lot 635), attributed to Udaltsova by the four experts, is strikingly similar to the artist's *Blue Jug* (1915) in the Tretyakov Gallery. It fetched 110,000 (\$149,000). *Nature morte au homard* (Lot 646), attributed to Larionov by Chauvelin and Anthony Parton, is extremely like Larionov's *Still Life with Crayfish* (ca. 1910–12) in the Ludwig Museum in Cologne. It sold for 150,000 (\$204,000).

Generally, Russian avant-garde artists fetch much lower prices at Nagel and other small auction houses than these artists would be expected to bring at lar-

ger houses. "The consignors agreed to the prices," said Nagel's Kocher-Benzing. "For higher prices, such as realized in the salerooms of Christie's and Sotheby's, we do not have the customers. But we take in what we can, naturally."

Many of the works certified by Chauvelin and other experts have been analyzed by conservation scientists Elisabeth Jägers, vice dean of the Faculty of Culture Sciences of Cologne University of Applied Sciences, and her husband, Erhard Jägers, of Bornheim, Germany. The pair test large numbers of Russian avant-garde works offered in smaller auction houses and in galleries throughout Europe.

Erhard Jägers told *ARTnews* that he authenticates a work if "nothing speaks against" the attribution—if he can find no reason not to authenticate it. He said he almost never attributes works firmly, and then only in very well documented cases.

The Jägerses certified, for example, a mixed-media work on paper by Popova—from a Swiss private collection, according to the catalogue—that was offered for sale at Hampel Art Auctions in Munich last July 4 (Lot 776). Art experts, however, see several problems in this painting. One of its motifs is the back of a bentwood chair visible behind a table. The name of the chair's manufacturer, Thonet, is written in letters of different sizes and fonts, and it also contains a chronological anomaly. The cubistic style of the painting dates it very early in the century, but Thonet's name is written in the new orthography adopted in Russia after the revolution: the letter yer, which was in use until 1918, is missing. Another anomaly, according to experts: the composition is signed with Popova's initial and her last name in a script the artist never used elsewhere for her signature. The work didn't sell.

Director Holger Hampel told *ARTnews* that he couldn't discuss past sales. He said that the firm relied on its own art-historical and technical experts.

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The earliest Russian avant-garde fakes to flood the West were Suprematist paintings and drawings, which began turning up in the late '60s and '70s, experts say. Suprematist compositions, which are built up from simple geometric elements, attract imitators because they look as if they would be easy to replicate. According to Shatskikh, author of *Vitebsk: The Life of Art* (Yale University Press), commercial interest in Suprematism increased after Malevich's centenary, in 1978, and "large numbers of Suprematist works attributed to Unovis members appeared in European galleries and auction houses."

Suprematism was generated in Vitebsk in the circle of Malevich, a charismatic teacher who gathered around him a group of students and disciples who called themselves Champions of the New Art, or Unovis. These artists shared a strikingly similar fate, according to Shatskikh. All died young and without heirs. Contemporaries and witnesses to their lives and artistic personalities had disappeared. Although their names were known, and although they appeared in group photographs, their works were completely unknown. Add what Shatskikh calls "the apparent ease with which geometric abstract art can be forged," and the circumstances arise for a flood of forgeries.

When the works appeared on the market, explanations were required. "As a rule," according to Shatskikh, "the canvases were found 'accidentally,' their former owners or possessors either not indicated, or else it was said that 'it has proven impossible to name them.'" One "suitable figure for this kind of falsification" was Nina Kogan.

In 1985 Galerie Schlégl in Zurich organized an exhibition of 26 works attributed to the hitherto unknown Kogan. According to the biography published in the catalogue, Kogan was born in Vitebsk, became Malevich's pupil, followed him to Petrograd (Saint Petersburg) after the breakup of Unovis, and died in the gulag. Fortunately, the catalogue stated, Kogan's works had been hidden by devoted friends and then spirited abroad. Watercolors and gouaches

attributed to her were beginning to flood the market at the time of the Schlégl show.

Shatskikh published a very different account of Nina Kogan's life, based on her own investigations. She discovered that Kogan was born in Saint Petersburg into an elite circle of converted Jews. The daughter of a high-ranking military doctor, she studied at the exclusive School of the Order of Saint Catherine. She returned to Leningrad (Saint Petersburg) in the late '20s and took up residence in a single room in her family's former apartment, which she shared with 20 other people and a pet white rooster. She died in the winter of 1942, during the German blockade of the city.

Kogan's devoted friends who, according to the Schlégl catalogue, saved her works and smuggled them to the West were strangely ignorant of the true facts of her life, according to Shatskikh. They embellished her biography with such details as a childhood in Jewish Vitebsk and death in Stalin's concentration camp.

Kogan created many "Cubist constructions" on paper and canvas, according to Shatskikh, but only three known works, all of them minor, survived. Her artistic legacy was destroyed. She undoubtedly never imagined the posthumous existence that awaited her in the auction houses of the West, where Suprematist-style watercolors and oil paintings signed with her name would appear regularly.

Auction houses have sold more than 150 works attributed to Kogan since the late '80s. Chauvelin has certified some of them. Asked to comment on many experts' belief that Kogan's heritage has been grossly falsified, Chauvelin replied, "I was in Moscow once during the 1980s. I was offered a crate of her works, which contained 100 or 150 works—watercolors, gouaches, et cetera. They were asking \$20 to \$50 for a work. I didn't buy because nobody here knew her. Until 1995 she was not known here at all."

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Works attributed to Kogan have appeared not only at smaller auctioneers in Spain, Germany, and France, but also at Sotheby's and Christie's. Sotheby's London sale of March 15, 2007, included a watercolor attributed to Kogan (Lot 324); Christie's offered another (Lot 1186) on November 27, 2007. Neither was sold. Sotheby's did not respond to requests for comment. Christie's responded with a statement saying, "Christie's will not sell any work of art that we know or have any reason to believe is inauthentic." Christine Stauffer, a partner at Galerie Kornfeld in Bern, said that she relied on experts in the field.

Anna (Khaya) Kagan (or Kogan) is another artist who remains an enigma to art historians. No work by Kagan (1902–74) is in any Russian museum, nor was a single work of hers published during her lifetime. According to Shatskikh, a painting in the Kawamura Memorial Museum of Art in Sakura, Japan, which appeared in the exhibition "Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism," at the Menil Collection in Houston and the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2003, is not a Malevich. She conjectures that it is a work by Kagan. Another painting by this artist is in the Ernst Schwitters collection in Norway.

Despite her obscurity, however, Kagan is another veteran of the art market. Works attributed to her or to Anna Kogan started appearing in Western galleries and auction houses at the beginning of the '80s and are still appearing.

Abstract Composition, attributed to Kagan, was offered (but not sold) at Kunsthaus Lempertz in Cologne on June 2, 2007. Ulrike Ittershagen, a Lempertz modern-art specialist, agreed that it was difficult to attribute works to artists who were so little known. "We are not experts in the Russian avant-garde," she said. "We trusted the consignor" and two prominent experts who had certified the work, Andrei Nakov and Vasily Rakitin. Ittershagen pointed out that paintings attributed to both Nina Kogan and Anna Kagan had appeared in museum exhibitions.

Today, works attributed to other forgotten artists who worked in Vitebsk during the '20s are popping up on the international market. On June 12 of last year, for example, MacDougall's in London offered a painting called *Portrait of a Woman in a Blue Dress* by Nadezhda Liubavina (Lot 81), an artist for whom only fragmentary information is available.

According to Shatskikh, who was not familiar with the painting at MacDougall's and did not comment on it, Liubavina was in the first wave of Petrograd artists to come to Vitebsk. "Although her rise in Russian art was meteoric," Shatskikh wrote, "Liubavina's disappearance was just as rapid, leaving almost no trace." At the beginning of the '20s, she married a professor from India and returned with him to his native country. Only two works by Liubavina are in Russian museum collections. The painting offered by MacDougall's is the only known canvas attributed to the artist that is executed in the Cubo-Futurist style. The catalogue provides no information about its provenance. The painting failed to find a buyer.

The auction house's codirector, William MacDougall, said that attributing works to such little-known artists was "a very big problem. We're very cautious with avant-garde works." This painting, he said, "was signed by the artist and viewed by our experts, who felt it was genuine."

Shatskikh added that it is not only Malevich's Suprematism that is being faked. Today, she said, there are fakes of his early Impressionist landscapes and his post-Suprematist figurative works as well.

There is one major artist of the Russian avant-garde whose heritage has been well protected, and that is Vasily Kandinsky, who died in France in 1944. Plenty of pictures attributed to Kandinsky are available for sale, as a search of the Internet shows, but an experienced collector will be wary of them unless the Kandinsky Society in Paris has given them its imprimatur, experts say. Neither Sotheby's nor Christie's will accept a painting or drawing attri-

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buted to Kandinsky for auction unless the society has accepted the work for its catalogue raisonné.

The society, which is based in the Pompidou Center, was established in 1979 by the artist's widow, Nina, to protect and promote Kandinsky's legacy. Its current president is former French prime minister Edouard Balladur. The directors of the three museums that hold the major part of Kandinsky's works in the West—the National Museum of Modern Art at the Pompidou Center, the Lenbachhaus in Munich, and the Guggenheim Museum—are also members. The society does not hand out certificates; it informs owners that it will—or will not—list their works in its ongoing multivolume catalogue raisonné. Its services are free.

Some critics have accused the Kandinsky Society of monopolizing the right to authenticate the artist's works and have charged that its assumption of absolute expertise is unwarranted. Chauvelin, for example, can hardly restrain his bitterness when talking about the society. "You come to the society, which is like a tribunal of the Holy Inquisition, and leave your work there," Chauvelin said. "Two weeks later, you come back to pick it up and get the answer—positive or negative. Usually the answer is negative. If you don't have a photograph of the painting in Kandinsky's hands, it's the end."

More recently, a challenge to the Kandinsky Society has come from the East. In the last few years, dozens of previously unknown paintings and watercolors attributed to Kandinsky have turned up in Moscow and Saint Petersburg and then made their way abroad. Many of these works appeared on the market with authentication certificates from the Tretyakov Gallery or other Russian institutions.

About a dozen hitherto unknown paintings and watercolors, most of them from private collections, were illustrated in a monumental monograph, *Kandinsky in Russia*, written by Valery Turchin, a prominent art historian and professor at Moscow State University, that appeared in simultaneous

Russian and English editions in Moscow in 2005. It is a lavish volume whose publication was supported financially by the Russian government. None of these recently discovered works appears in the Kandinsky Society's catalogue raisonné.

Turchin is a member of the Society of Admirers of the Art of Wassily Kandinsky, which was established in Moscow in 2004. The organization has no headquarters. Its activities have been limited to the publication of Turchin's monograph and the installation of a memorial plaque on the house where Kandinsky lived in Moscow. According to Turchin, the Moscow society has no membership restrictions. "Everybody who likes the art of Kandinsky can consider himself a member," he said.

Turchin is as bitter as Chauvelin about the Kandinsky Society, which has declined his invitation to cooperate with the Moscow society. He believes that the Paris society treats Kandinsky as a European artist, not a Russian one. "Their main problem is that they don't like the idea that Kandinsky is a Russian artist," he said. "French or German, okay, but not Russian. It's a tradition. I want to change it. That's why they are not enthusiastic about me."

To Turchin, the main problem is not Kandinsky's nationality but what he considers the Paris society's monopoly on attributing his works. He said that he was frequently approached by private collectors who owned works by Kandinsky and wanted his opinion of them, but "there is always a big problem because there is always a concern about what the Paris society will say." Who decided, Turchin asked, "that they are the standard-bearer?"

A painting attributed to Kandinsky, he said, "can be sold in a Western auction only if it is authenticated by the Paris society. That's very sad because, for example, if a person has a Kandinsky and Paris does not authenticate the work but the person knows for sure it is a Kandinsky, he is in a gray zone, he is almost illegal."

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Kandinsky in Russia is similar to a number of lavishly produced monographs and exhibition catalogues published recently in both Europe and Russia, in which unfamiliar works are reproduced in color along with known works. In almost all cases, the unfamiliar works were not exhibited, described, or reproduced during the artist's lifetime.

Asked where so many unknown paintings by Kandinsky came from, Turchin gave an answer often heard from experts and art dealers who deal with unprovenanced Russian artworks. "We cannot exclude the possibility that certain Kandinsky paintings were lost or went missing during the revolution," he said. "It was complete chaos. Others may have been lost during World War II. Were these missing paintings destroyed or saved?"

The Kandinsky Society doesn't comment on works it rejects for its catalogue raisonné. Christian Derouet, the society's treasurer and a co-organizer of the Kandinsky exhibition on view at the Pompidou Center through August 10 (it is opening at the Guggenheim Museum in New York on September 18), is responsible for its invaluable archive of Kandinsky's papers and correspondence. Derouet met Turchin in Paris a few years ago. "I was surprised that the Russian art historian didn't express any interest in seeing our archival collection," was his only comment.

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