

DA VERY MUCH

The Russian art market isn't all about oligarchs snapping up work by foreign masters – savvy foreigners are snapping up work by Russian masters too, says Viola Raikhel

On 3rd May 2006, a mysterious man dressed like a KGB agent, complete with broken nose and brutish manners, stunned those in the Sotheby's sale room in New York, myself included, when he paid \$95 million for Pablo Picasso's 1941 *Dora Maar au Chat*. With a hammer price of \$85 million, plus the \$10 million buyer's commission, the sale not only secured Dora Maar's place as the second-most expensive painting to be sold at auction, but also recognised that Russian collectors are an undeniable force in fuelling the international art market.

Stories like this, however, only promote the notion that the Russian art market encompasses the activity of a select few 'New Russians' (Novii Ruski) with increasing millions and growing appetites for the next outward and movable display of their wealth. Once the cars, homes, jewellery, yachts and occasional football team have been bought, how better for them to show their elevated aesthetic, their latest financial windfall, or the sale of their bank to the outside world than by acquiring art. With Londongrad now the new capital of Russia, and many of Russia's 53 billionaires living here, it is easy to lose sight of the other collectors and facets of the marketplace that make up today's Russian art market.

Russia has a rich history steeped in the patronage and appreciation of the arts, going back to the 18th century, a colorful and decadent time when Catherine the Great came to reign over and enlighten an empire. Catherine was single-handedly responsible for creating the Hermitage Museum, Russia's last remaining vestige of a past so rich that it pains one to think of the devastation that revolution and communism have wrought. The collections that adorn its walls are a culmination of her political game-playing and savvy use of agents in the international marketplace, who were able to identify collections that were being sold for reasons of political and financial distress. Catherine wanted her collecting to differentiate her from a largely illiterate Russia, to announce her financial power to the world, to demonstrate her enlightenment and to assert her superiority. Today, while the psyche and motivations behind Russian's buying may in fact mirror those of Catherine, a confluence of factors mark this as a unique and often intriguing time in the Russian art market.

Much like Catherine and the agents she employed in her day, Russian collectors are now using art advisory

services to access and navigate their paths through the art world. Today, unfortunately, the provenance and authenticity of many Russian works are dubious, and Russians, often simply by virtue of their accents, are seen as easy prey for hungry dealers and auction houses. After the sale of the Dora Maar in New York – to our Russian friend with the broken nose – several calls were placed to myself and others in the market asking us to identify other Picasso works of Dora Maar and similarly colorful and characteristically 'Picasso' Picassos. Competitiveness being another very Russian trait, the market for such works is a-buzz in an attempt to satisfy their yearning for these new objects of desire. In the past, a number of my Russian clients had experienced overzealous dealers and auction houses with overpriced works and increasing buyer premiums. Working with them, they are almost transfixed in disbelief that I can find them the brand names they seek and a user guide to boot, without the burgeoning fees.

In a world where the word Russian has become synonymous with oligarchs and billowing wealth, one need not own an oil pipeline through Azerbaijan to be part of the excitement. International collectors have identified the Russian art market as an emerging market – and as a means of diversifying their portfolio of investments. The lack of correlation between the stock and art markets continues to make it an attractive diversification tool. Contemporary Russian artists are gaining steam among their international counterparts and can be seen the world over at art fairs and in galleries. The Russian market has not seen so much money flowing in and out of it since the time of nobility and royal courts in the 18th century.

But before you race out to hunt down your first Russian masterpiece, please beware of the many possible pitfalls surrounding fakes and legal issues in the marketplace. Besides 19th-century Russian landscapes being the most frequently forged in the art market today, there are other concerns. When Communism fell, so did the locks on many back doors of the state museums in Russia, leading to the illegal sale for cash of national masterpieces which have since begun popping up for sale in light of the heightened prices being realised. And if you think you can rest assured in the knowledge that your latest acquisition has a certificate of authenticity from a Russian state museum, then think again. Certificates to accompany modern forgeries run at a market price of US \$1,000 from an official state expert.



Above: Inside the Hermitage Museum
Top: Picasso's *Dora Maar au Chat*