

ARTISTIC ALLIANCE

BY HUNTER DROHOJOWSKA

Forty masterworks of Impressionist and Modern art make a state visit from the Soviet Union



Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)
Are You Jealous?
(*Abaoa'itehi*), 1892

Paul Cezanne (1839-1906)
Still Life With Milk Can, Cane, and Coffee Bowl, 1880-1880

Last November's summit meeting between this country and the Soviet Union doesn't seem to have produced much in the way of mutual understanding. The Russians think of President Reagan as a cowboy. Most of our citizens don't trust Secretary General Gorbachev. Ensuing international events haven't improved matters any.

But one enlightened resolution has managed to survive the Chernobyl meltdown and the Libyan raids — the cultural exchange agreement that now brings us 40 Impressionist and early Modern paintings from Russia's Hermitage and Pushkin museums. Some of these works, including Gauguin's *The Canoe*, Picasso's *Still Life With Skull* and Matisse's *Red Room*, have never been exhibited abroad before.

The exhibit is coming to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art this Thursday from its debut at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, and it will continue on to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in August. The museum visit promises to be this summer's blockbuster, not only because of its rarity and the diplomatic hurdles that had to be overcome, but most of all because of the paintings themselves.

Arrangements between the two countries were made by philanthropist art collector Dr. Armand Hammer, who seems to be on better speaking terms with the Russians than anyone else in America. Hammer and his Occidental Petroleum Corporation picked up the enormous tab for bringing these Soviet pictures to three American museums and, as collateral, Hammer sent his own "Five Centuries of Masterpieces"



to the USSR State Art Gallery. (In the bargain, the National Gallery also loaned 40 Impressionist paintings to be exhibited in Leningrad and Moscow.)

Hammer explains his efforts as follows: "I have been a longtime supporter of cultural accords because they often serve as a thread that holds us

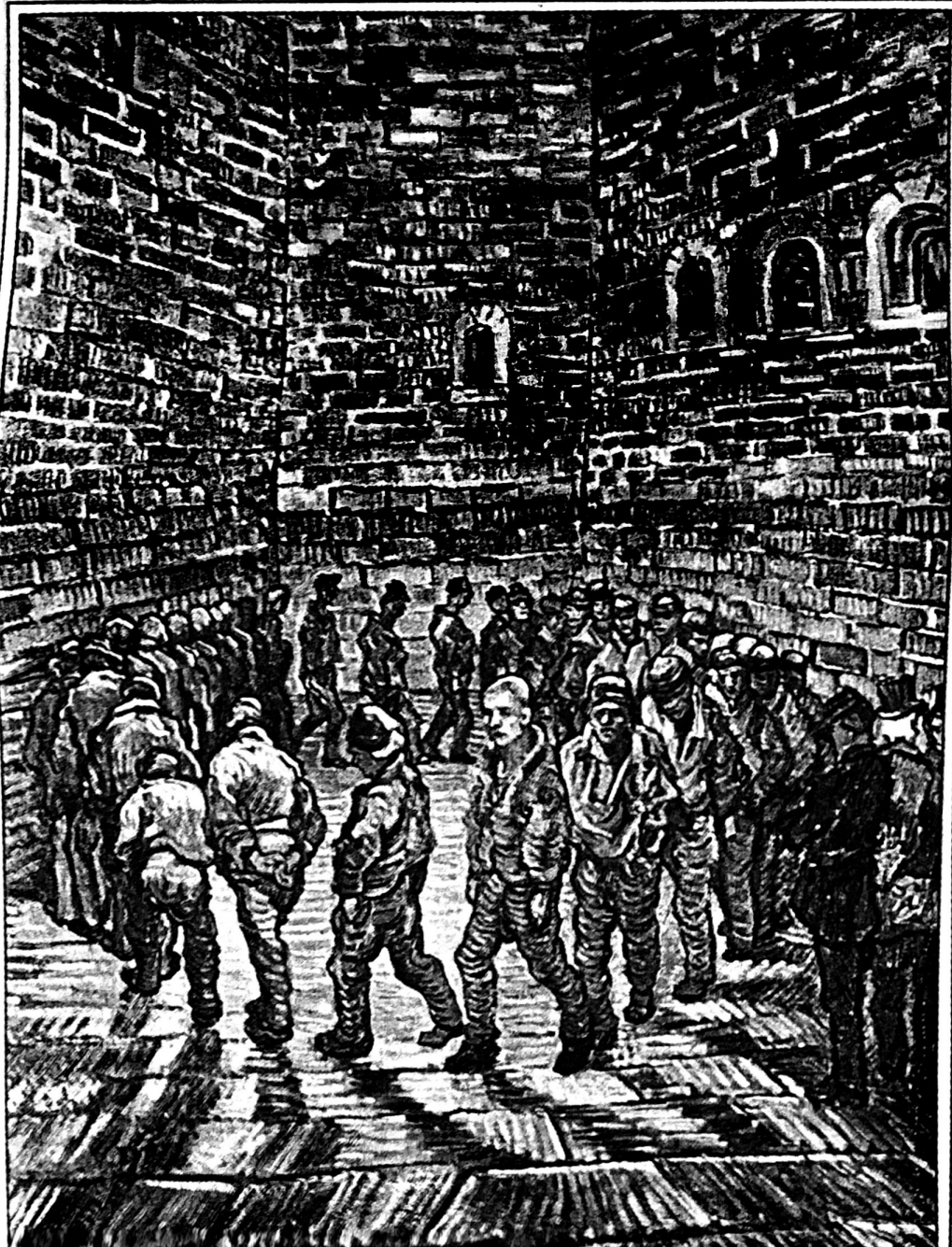
together until stronger bonds are forged at the conference table. Meanwhile, we can appreciate the happy circumstance that brings us such an immense and varied assortment of Czajkowski's works. Reminiscent of the paintings of Picasso and Matisse, these landscapes and portraits recall an era in which Russian collectors were as advanced and adventuresome as any in the world. Many of the

paintings were collected by two wealthy Russians with the taste to rival that of the Stain family or the remarkable Conestogys of Baltimore, whose collectors are shown at the CMAA's Fall

Serge Stuchkin (1855-1937) and Ivan Morozov (1871-1921) were born into families devoted to collecting art. By all accounts, Stuchkin, a wealthy Moscow merchant, was the more radical of the two, trusting his taste for the wild new art despite society's more conservative opinion.

Stuchkin, in fact, had the honor of bringing to Moscow the very first Impressionist painting ever seen in that city: Monet's *Lilac in the Sun*, which he

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Henri Matisse (1869-1954)
Nasturtiums With 'La Danse', 1912

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
The Prison Courtyard, 1890



transported from Paris in 1897. By 1904 he was already buying vast numbers of paintings by Matisse, who was not then well known even among the Parisian avant-garde.

Morozov's millionaire factory owner was less impetuous and daring than his friends but he amassed an equally impressive collection. Originally inspired to collect by his brother, Mikhail, who bought for himself such paintings as Renoir's *Portrait of the Actress Jeanne Samary* and Gauguin's *The Canoe*, Ivan began to collect with greater determination after his brother's premature death.

Despite their differences in taste, Morozov and Shchukin hunted with complementary purpose, ultimately building what one observer called "a Shchukin collection as amended by Morozov." While Shchukin was a risk-taker who loved to discover young artists and launch careers, Morozov sought to compile a rich and complete overview of an important era in modern art. According to Matisse, Morozov would visit the art dealer Ambroise Vollard and ask to be shown the best Cézanne, while Shchukin wanted to see all the Cézannes and make his own choice.

The expansive and dramatic Shchukin would buy several canvases at one time, while Morozov would

painstakingly seek something special that he alone saw in a single painting. In fact, the methodical Morozov was so intent upon finding the ideal landscape done late in Cézanne's life at Aix that he searched six years after the painter's death to find *Blue Landscape*.

Even before the Russian Revolution of 1917—after which both collections were nationalized and eventually housed in public museums—Shchukin made his collection accessible to the general public, thus having a great influence on the younger generation of Russian artists. Morozov's collection wasn't open to the public, although he regularly entertained Russian artists. He reportedly enjoyed the

Henri Matisse (1869-1954)
Red Room (Harmony in Red), 1908

Matisse's *Red Room*, left, was to return to the Soviet Union after being displayed at the National Gallery in Washington. At the last minute, the Russians relented and allowed the painting to proceed here with the exhibition.

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973)
Portrait of Ambroise Vollard, 1909-1910

Parisian art dealer Ambroise Vollard, immortalized in Picasso's cubist portrait, below, sold Morozov and Shchukin many of their important Impressionist works.

shock experienced by visitors to his Moscow town house when they were confronted with Cezanne's disturbing *Still Life With Milk Can, Carafe, and Coffee Bowl*; his brooding *Mont Sainte-Victoire Seen from Les Lauves*; Gauguin's erotic *Are You Jealous?*; or Matisse's startling *Conversation and Nasturtiums With "La Danse,"* all paintings that are part of this exhibition.

Visitors to Morozov's house could also see 18 Cezannes, including *Large Pine Near Aix* and Monet's *Pond at Montgeron* and *Corner of the Garden at Montgeron* — these last two were decorative panels originally commissioned for the home of Impressionist patron Ernest Hoschede at Montgeron.

They could study Renoir's intimate, if formal, *Portrait of the Actress Jeanne Samary*, inherited from his brother, the confined aggression of van Gogh's *The Prison Courtyard*; or Picasso's astonishing

psychological study of the art dealer who sold the two Russian collectors many of their paintings — *Portrait of Ambroise Vollard*.

As patrons of French art, Shchukin and Morozov have distinguished predecessors. Russian society before the Revolution maintained strong cultural and linguistic ties to France. Catherine the Great bought numerous French canvases when she founded the Hermitage in the mid-18th century, setting an example for the court and the upper classes.

In the 19th century, the support for art shifted from the aristocracy of St. Petersburg to the Moscow merchant class. The Tretyakov brothers bought Russian paintings but also collected works from the Barbizon school of landscape artists, now in the Pushkin Museum. Both the Hermitage and Pushkin museums have massive collections of French art from the mid-18th to the early 20th century, acquired from wealthy patrons after the Russian Revolution.

Ironically, after the nationalization of both their collections in 1919, the men who had established Russia's reputation as a home for the avant-garde were forced to leave Russia. Morozov died in Karisbad in 1921; Shchukin lived in Paris until 1937. Sadly, the artists Shchukin had once supported had little time for him, as he had neither the means nor the urge to collect any longer.

Curious to say, the Impressionist and Modern paintings that best express the social and technological transitions of the turbulent fin-de-siecle era seem safe, pretty pictures to our eyes, provoking nostalgia for a lost era. Most American viewers are less apt to see cultural provocation in these works than gardens, ponds and attractive men and women at leisure.

In Russia, the paintings retained their controversial thrust a little longer and stayed hidden in museum basements until after World War II. In our time, however, they have proven themselves the ideal currency of cultural exchange, providing a neutral glimpse at a simpler past for two wary superpowers. ■

Hunter Drohojowska's last article for California Living profiled benefactor/collector Joe D. Price and the Shin'enkan Collection he donated to the L. A. County Museum of Art.

TICKET INFORMATION

Impressionist to Early Modern Paintings from the USSR: Works From the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, and the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, June 26-August 12, 1986.

Due to the expected popularity of this exhibition, LACMA hours have been extended. The museum will be open Monday and Tuesday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; and Wednesday through Sunday, 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., except for June 26-29 and July 9, 16 and 18, when the show will close at 5 p.m.

Tickets are designated for specific one-hour periods throughout each day, guaranteeing admission at any time during that hour. Tickets (\$4, adults; \$2, children 5-12) will be available at the museum ticket kiosk, at all Ticketmaster outlets and for credit card purchase through Ticketmaster's phone service at 480-3232 and (714) 740-2000. For further information, call 857-6386. ■

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