

Artists Leaping Forward

In the course of three years since I started to go around the galleries as a hobby in Moscow, the number of artists whose style I liked and drew my attention among the artists having regularly exhibited in the galleries became around ten, and as regards two of them, who were comparatively young, I was able to see with my own eyes that their artistic abilities had grown to a considerable level respectively since a certain point of time. Therefore, in this chapter I would introduce their works.

One of these artists is Oleg Avakimyan, and he became my favorite painter through his work I acquired first at the gallery near my apartment on Lenin Avenue in the spring of 1991.

The piece having the title of *Winter in the Mountains* (Illustration 25) is a winter landscape of the mountains depicted in a large composition that arranged behind a mountain with a sanatorium on it even three mountain peaks and the bright blue sky above them. According to the very first secretary of my office, the piece depicts winter in the mountains of Armenia. Her late husband was Armenian and used to tell her that winter in Armenia tinged the air with pink. I once had the opportunity to show her this piece, and at the first glance she instantly decided so. Maybe she is correct as the artist's surname stands for Armenian. If so, then the mountains are the Lesser Caucasus Mountain Range, but at any rate the grandeur and the solid sense of existence of the mountains are really impressive. The presence of the skiers depicted small on the bridge shows the custom of enjoying winter holidays at a sanatorium, but at the same time is assigned a role in intensifying the sense of magnificent scale of these mountains; the skiers look even smaller before this grand scale. The light shining from the right side enhance a beauty of this scenery by adding to it the diversified nuances of shadows, and this sunlight does produce an exquisite harmony of the brown tones of the mountains and trees with the pinkish white hues of the snow, attaching a gentle stillness to the grand beauty of this painting.

When you look at the piece from a distance in natural light, depth appears in the

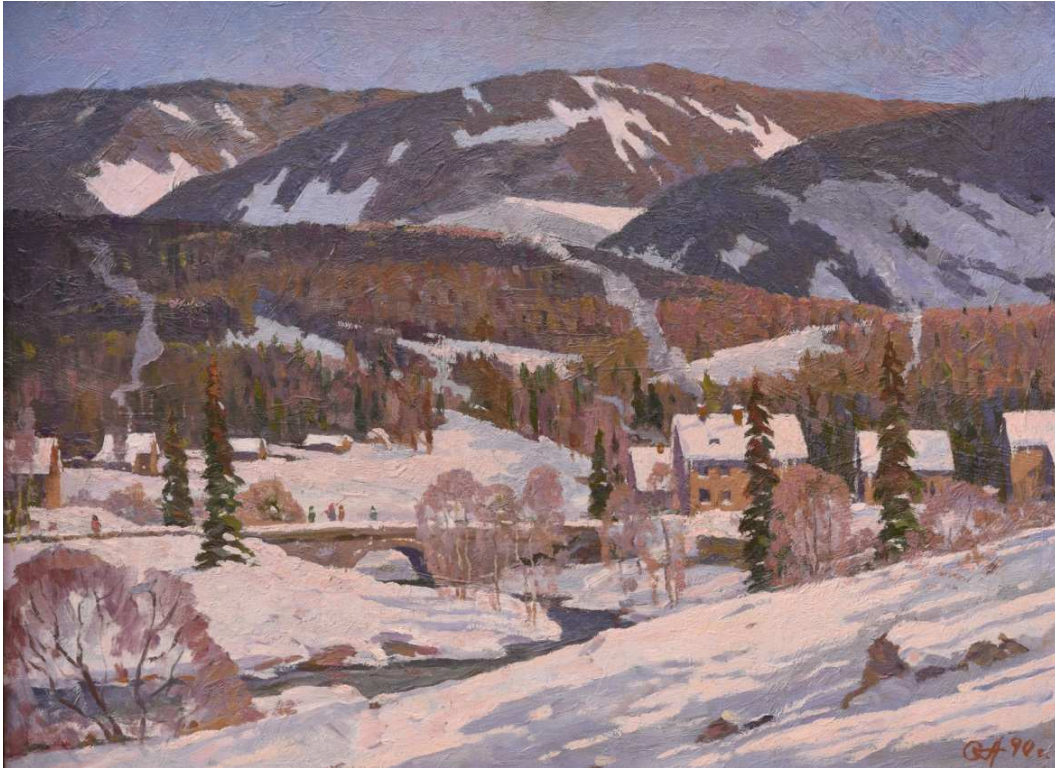


Illustration 25

Oleg A. Avakimyan (Born 1949)

Winter in the Mountains (1990) Oil on canvas, 60 × 80 cm

blue of the sky and the feel of the sunlight shining on the peaks intensifies, which makes the contrast of the surfaces of the mountain peaks hit by sun with those of the shaded parts even more distinct. Besides, the air gets even clearer and the overall painting looks vivid as if it was refurbished. This piece the artist painted while staying at the sanatorium depicted in it has surely attained an excellent artistic level.

I hung it on the wall of my living room and I grew to like it more while looking at it every day, and naturally came to be interested in the artist. His name cannot be found in the latest “Directory of the Members of the Union of Artists of the USSR” dated April 1, 1988. Since *Winter in the Mountains* was on display for sale at a gallery open only to members of the Union of Artists, he probably became a member after the date of this publication. His father’s name is listed in this directory as an artist. It means that his artist stock spans the two generations of parent and child often seen in Russia. Most probably his talent for painting has been cultivated in the artistic environment of

such a family.

I later obtained an album published in 1985 with the title of “Young Artists Painting on their Country” in a used bookstore in Moscow, and his work was introduced there. From this, I learned that he was born in 1949 and studied paintings at the M.B. Grekov Art school in Rostov, which means that *Winter in the Mountains* was done when he was forty one years old, and in the Russian art world with lots of elder artists he can be regarded as still young artist belonging to a group who is successively expected to be very active in the future, too, to be recognized as a grand master.



Illustration 26

Oleg A. Avakimyan

Winter in Yelets (1991) Oil on canvas, 70 x 90 cm

The next piece, *Winter in Yelets* (Illustration 26), is the one I encountered at the end of 1991 or the following spring at the same gallery, took a liking to and bought it. As

you will find in a map, Yelets is on the Sosna River, a tributary of the Don River, about four hundred kilometers south of Moscow, and is a medium-size city by Russian standard. The area depicted in this piece is likely a residential area that has flourished since old times. The street, shown in a composition setting a church in the center, has upward slope towards the church with wooden steps set up on one side so that pedestrians would not slip down, through which people are walking down or up in the clothes as they like and it makes this piece almost a genre painting depicting the everyday lives of the people while also being a landscape.

The sun seldom appears in Moscow in winter, but because Yelets is located by far to the south, they likely have many fine weather days there. The bright sun pours down on the snowy landscape, and the varied nuances of the shadows make this piece all the more worth looking. In the external appearance of the brick houses we can feel a heavy solidness, and the people walking along the street are also painted skillfully. It's a pretty good piece that allows us to feel the scent of life of the people in Yelets.

Avakimyan exhibited his works in the galleries regularly once a month from the spring of 1991 until the following spring. He consigned his works to three galleries, namely, the gallery on the Lenin Avenue or in Petrovka, or October gallery and one could not predict at which of these galleries his work would appear. At that time, I used to visit each of these galleries, so I must have seen almost all his works for that period, and as a result, by the spring of 1992, I had got four pieces, including the two introduced in this chapter. I gave up on the remaining two-thirds or so because I came across other paintings that I liked more, or I passed on them because the work did not sufficiently appeal to me.

After that period, however, for more than half a year, his paintings suddenly stopped appearing in any galleries, and I worried that he had abruptly fallen ill or that he had abandoned Russia and moved abroad, but around the start of winter that year, three large pieces suddenly showed up in the October Gallery all at once, surprising and delighting me. I say this because the artistic level of these three was one rank higher than the pieces up to then as if he had made some improvements. He seems to have worked hard somewhere on the serious production of paintings, resulting in these three pieces.

The next piece is one of these three that I particularly liked and purchased in a flash on the spot.



Illustration 27

Oleg A. Avakimyan

Late August (1992) Oil on canvas, 80 × 120 cm

This piece, entitled *Late August* (Illustration 27), depicts a scene close to evening in early fall with the restrained color tones of the basic color of brown from above the pond. The sun setting in the west can be seen through the thin veil of clouds in the sky, and this faint, gentle light dominates whole scene, creating an exquisite atmosphere rich in nuances. Its composition is large enough to drastically grasp the width of pond as broadly as possible, placing behind a deep landscape with the expressive sky and the large canvas of 80 × 120 cm is fully taken advantage of. The attractive point of this piece, above all, is in the expression of a realistic feel of water surface, and the excellence of this workmanship makes the piece lively and truly impressive.

Looking at this piece from a distance in sufficient natural light, the background recedes even further, bringing out a deeper depth and the sun, gathering the light, gets naturally radiant. The characteristic of this artist lies in the method of taking color balance based on basic color of brown, and this virtue is on full display in this work as well. The restrained color tone of brown tinged with the pathos gives off a feeling of regret at passing away of summer. It can be said that this piece, which I view constantly without ever getting tired of it, is one of the paintings I like the most in my collection.

When Avakimyan broke a fresh ground in his style of painting, there were only less than eight months left before I finished my time in Moscow, and the first gallery I generally went to at this time was the Center of Fine Art. I was no longer in the habit of always making the rounds of every other gallery. So regrettably, I was able to see just a few of his later works prior to the end of my station there.

And I'll never forget one of them. It was a painting of a vertical canvas about 120 × 80 cm and was truly excellent. On the right side of foreground, from the bottom till just below the middle of the canvas, was depicted in brown color tones a close-up of a covered coach standing still, and in the background on the left, the snowy street from possibly the 19th century looked hazy in the snow sprays crawling along the earth and dancing in the wind. On the remaining part of the upper canvas was portrayed an expressive sky covered by moving white clouds in a high extensive composition and a man, apparently the coachman, standing by the perch of the coach as if leaning on it, was looking up at the winter sun shining behind the clouds.

Why did this painting so charm me? It was because the sun, glittering through the cloudy sky, which was the focus of this painting, was portrayed with strong white color tones so realistically that could cause a viewer even a wonder and besides, that the weakened mild sunrays, while passing through the clouds and getting to the earth, casted light shades in the air was reproduced quite excellently and realistically with a reverberation rich in nuances.

Although I was deeply fond of this painting, the price which was also important factor for me was such a large sum that I almost wondered if the amount had been wrongly indicated by one digit more. This price was the evidence of deep confidence

on the part of the artist and the gallery, and the painting did have sufficient merit for the price, but faced with this high price, I was unable to make the decision to purchase it and in the end I gave it up. In the process of my painting collection, I have had a lingering regret at not buying a good painting in several cases, out of which this one has left the utmost regret in my mind even now. This artist, especially since he broke new ground, has aimed to reproduce an exquisite world colored with faint light, and embodied it in his works successfully. That's why I have the strong desire to see his later works and so he belongs to the artists whose future activities I have great interests in.

The second artist is Sergei Neshshimniy, who is also a friend of mine. He had a small studio made specially on the mezzanine and coming in and out is made only through a door at the back corner of the gallery named the Center of Fine Arts, and he occasionally repaired damaged paintings in this gallery or helped with frame production in the frame factory in the basement of the gallery, if necessary, but usually he painted in his studio.

He first appeared in front of me, introduced to me by previously-mentioned Valery Dmitrievich, because he was called down for repairs when I pointed out some damage to a painting on display. He mixed some colors together to prepare the necessary color on the spot and mended the scratch without difficulty. Noticing the accuracy of choosing colors for this painting and his outstanding skillfulness, I recalled the story I heard once that a genuine restorer of paintings must be an authority on depicting all sorts of forms and the various brushwork styles, in addition to having mastered the technique of how to mix paints for the required color. Neshshimniy's work at the place impressed me so much that I even thought that the restoration of paintings was his very profession for a while till Valery Dmitrievich finally asked me to look at his paintings. Then I realized he was an artist.

Seaweed Collectors (Illustration 28) is the work I first acquired together with one other landscape, when I visited his studio two weeks later. The piece depicts how seaweed is collected on the coast of the White Sea. According to the artist, the man standing in the boat in the foreground, sticking his pole in the ocean to get seaweed, is the artist himself, who actually experienced this scene and reproduced it in this work.



Illustration 28

Sergei A. Neshshimniy (born 1961)

Member of the Russian Artists' Union

Seaweed Collectors (1985) Oil on canvas, 72 × 90 cm

The composition of someone standing and collecting seaweed in each of the three boats placed sideways at equal intervals towards the back is brimming with a sense of balance, and an united complete form raised to the level of fine arts is expressed in the movements of the three people captured in the moment of work. Their actions, with a feel of stillness in the movement and a movement in the stillness, are depicted as though they were connected to each other, and coupled with the expressions on their faces, they do attract us in a mysterious mood as if we were watching on the whole a Japanese traditional art of Noh dance. The color of the gentle white ocean, suggesting the transparency of the water, puts into relief these figures softly outlined with brown color tones. It shows that this scene is in quiet, wave-free inlet, but at the same time it brings out an effect that this is a stage on which the play is being performed.

Later, I became a good friend with Neshshimniy. When I was acquainted with him, he was still thirty years old. He was rather tall and a little thin for a Russian, and his mouth encircled by a thin beard often held a cigarette. He was the simple type of man that I like, extremely quiet and shy. He almost always did not try to sell his own works, nor made any self-advertisement. Consequently, I learned much later that he was a real member of the Russian Artists' Union, and had become a member when he was as young as twenty-seven. (To join the Russian Artists' Union, an applicant, after appealing one's name and artistic ability to some extent by taking part in various exhibitions, submits an application to the Union, continues to exhibit his or her works for fixed periods at exhibitions specified by the Union, and is judged on his or her qualifications. Neshshimniy had been actively exhibiting since 1985 and was approved for membership in 1989.)

The next work is a masterpiece enough to suggest the true abilities of this artist who has been welcomed as a member of the Artists' Union exceptionally young as he was.

Evening, Forest Lake (Illustration 29) depicts the evening scenery with a lake that looks like a small pond or a river with a forest on the opposite side. Because the bright evening sun is shining on the treetops of the forest, the lower part where the sun does not reach is veiled with emphasized shadows and, needless to say, this is because these areas are done with a painting method contrasting light with shadow in conformity with the laws of nature. From the title, it seems that the focus of the piece is in the shadows, but quite naturally the viewer's eyes travel first to the brightness of the evening sun. As might be expected, these bright areas are painted very well, in which the trees look three-dimensional, but what wonders us the most is that even the feel and warmth of the evening sun shining on the treetops is realistically expressed.

On New Year's Eve of the year when I had finished my work in Moscow, I went out on the balcony on the second floor of my home in the daytime to dust the frame of this piece. Then when I looked at the work in the shade of open air, I noticed that the areas depicting the evening sunlight took in the light and looked as if the actual evening sun was hitting the treetops. I don't intend at all to make an exaggerated description, but the portrayal effect was such that unconsciously I even held out my hands to capture the warmth of this realistic sunlight.



Illustration 29

Sergei A. Neshshimniy

Evening, Forest Lake (1991) Oil on canvas, 70 × 80 cm

Such being the case, the shadowed part of the scene looks dull, and so at first glance the piece on the whole seems to be inconspicuous type of painting, but carefully looking at the shady areas, we'll see they are attentively depicted with the same sense of solidity as in the areas, on which the evening sun is shining, and the forest and the lake sinking gloomily in the shade appear with a feel of the pleasant cool. The shadowed areas suggest that there is also a forest facing it, and looking at the painting again with this in mind, the imagined field of vision for this piece spreads out to the opposite side of the canvas, that is, behind the viewer, and the viewer's eyes naturally move to the shadowed areas. With careful viewing, the painting causes us to feel as if we were spending the very this moment as evening draws nearer while camping on the bank of a lake surrounded by woods, and we come to understand the intention of the artist in titling the work *Evening, Forest Lake*. This is surely a high artistic level of work, for which the author, with the aim to express the drastic contrast

between light and shadow, deliberately selected this scene difficult to make a good picture that does not have much charm for the layman's eyes, and nevertheless has succeeded in it wonderfully.

I invited Neshshimniy to Japan, as I had previously promised him, for three weeks from the beginning of October of the next year after my work in Moscow was finished. For about four days of them, I showed him around by car, from the Izu Peninsula to the Five Lakes of Mt. Fuji, and I made him acquainted with the beauty of autumn in Japan as the leaves were beginning to turn red. He would often get out of the car, and capture scenes on film and in sketches, based on which he produced several excellent Japanese landscapes after his return to Moscow.



Illustration 30

Sergei A. Neshshimniy

Evening in the Mountains (Japan) (1995) Oil on canvas, 57.5 × 97.5 cm

Evening in the Mountains (Japan) (Illustration 30), which is one of these pieces, depicts the view obtained by looking over the mountain pass of Jukkokutouge at a high point from the direction of Hakone and it is its drive-in that looks long and thin in

the center of the canvas. To tell the truth, before producing this piece, Neshshimniy drew the etude on the spot, which we reached by climbing up the mountain a bit ahead after passing through Jukkokutouge from the direction of Izu Peninsula. He began to paint just after two in the afternoon and as the sun went down three or four hours later, he depicted in this etude the view of afternoon towards evening, reflecting the transition of time while he was drawing. As for *Evening in the Mountains*, after he returned to Moscow, he produced it based on this experience before the impression would fade. The time in the piece, however, is a bit later in the evening.

He was impressed by the beauty of the Japanese landscape, but commented that this beauty was different from that of the Russian landscape. I didn't presume then to ask him what he meant, which I regret when I think of it now. If I were to give my own impression on this difference, the colors of nature—the rivers, the seas, the autumn leaves—differ and also the absolute amount of light is remarkably different. In addition to them, I would say that in Japan, while its perspective is limited, obstructed by mountains etc., the narrow views intensified by sufficient light are so distinct to show the smallest details, and the beauty of the Japanese landscape charms with vividness and delicacy in comparison with how the Russian landscape charms with its grandeur of scale. That's why I was extremely interested in how a Russian artist would express the Japanese landscape. The piece that I received was so wonderful, and did not betray my expectations.

In this work Neshshimniy did not simply depict a Japanese landscape. The rugged surface of the mountains is meagerly illuminated by the faint, indistinct evening light and such a feel of subtlety exuding from the expression of fine shades rich with inconstancy even in the dusk is just giving off a delicate flavor remarkably featuring the Japanese landscape. The mountains have a solid sense of reality with the expression of a rich atmosphere of mountains' autumn in the twilight, which makes this piece very impressive without any slightest hint of strangeness as a Japanese landscape. Neshshimniy's stay in Japan was short, but a close look at this piece shows us that he took advantage of the experience to enhance his artistic abilities.

Russia, Kuzov Island (White Sea) (Illustration 31) was done in 1996, about a year after Neshshimniy concentrated his attention on producing Japanese landscape. That



Illustration 31

Sergei A. Neshshimniy

Russia, Kuzov Island (White Sea) (1996) Oil on canvas, 50 × 90.5 cm

time corresponded to the period when he and a friend took their families to sail around the desert islands in the White Sea by his friend's prefabricated boat for more than a month when it turned to summer each year, as it had been their custom for several years. Their itinerary took them by train to a place called Kyem on the way from Moscow to Murmansk, where they built the prefab boat at the port which looked out on the White Sea. In 1995, he bought a prefab boat by himself and set sail on the White Sea with this friend in two boats. He told me that spending a week in the natural world of the White Sea and the desert islands relaxes and stretches the spine for itself, making you feel refreshed.

Based on the experiences of so enviable 1995 summer vacation, he reproduced in this piece the quite attractive scene of a desert island in the White Sea. The artist's viewpoint was high on the island, the coast of which we can see in the foreground, and he painted a panorama looking down on the sea from there. Speaking from the viewpoint of composition, the presence of the coast in the foreground brings about the effects marking conspicuous the broad space between the artist's view and the sea, and plays a role in setting up the dynamic and solid portrayal of the piece. The titled *Kuzov Island* (Basket Island) is the name of the island in the background, which comes from

the shape of the island that looks like an upside-down basket. The excellence of this piece, more than anything else, lies in the way how realistically, with vivid and gentle color tones, are expressed the feel of highly transparent air and the light overflowing throughout the entire landscape which is perfectly depicted with perspective. The skillful expression of light, in conformity with the laws of nature, in depicting the sea and the islands located from middle distance to background demonstrates how the artist has made light thoroughly his own already at such a young age. The expression of the strength of backlight reflecting off the surface of sea, almost hitting our eyes, is really impressive, and the hues of this expression have a power just like gushing, which can be said to be the evidence that it was done by a first-rate artist. The ocean surface is expressed so wonderfully that we can feel how light is actually reflecting, and the depths of the ocean, expressive even in its quiet, have a feel of solid mass, while the shallows have their own particular shallow texture. The great nature of White Sea in beautiful summer is reproduced with a high maturity.

******By the way, I had the opportunity to go to Moscow in summer of 2008. In this occasion to see the artist Neshshimniy there anew after a long interval, I contacted him beforehand by e-mail and availing myself of this opportunity, I incidentally attached to this mail the whole part of commentary dedicated to his works in this chapter, translated into Russian, to which I received a reply from him. If I quote its related part, it is as follows: "I received and read your letter with the extract from your book. Very large part of your commentary about my pieces coincides with my depicting intention which I tried to embody in the said pieces. Previously I did not discuss with you about paintings in detail, though it ought to have been done. If we had done so, it would have been useful and pleasant for me." Needless to say, this reply which was a pleasant surprise for me delighted me very much.

However, I hesitated to introduce it here to readers, since such idea made me feel as if I would show off my good eye for paintings, but in the end I decided to do so because, if taking into consideration the nature of this book intended for a wide range of readers, I think that such comments that enhance my prestige would function as a very important factor to work on the mind of readers affirmatively. That is to say, this book is intended not only for specialists and art lovers, but also for ordinary readers, including persons who think they themselves do not understand paintings very well. So I tried my best to write the book so that every reader can easily understand it. However, even if it has been actually done so, there appears another problem. Namely, intellect and sensibility are two different things. Therefore, thoroughly understanding the commentary which occupies a large part of this book does not always connect with a right judgment of a reader on whether or not the contents of such commentary are appropriate enough. As for my way of appreciating paintings, the excellent artist Ossovski mentioned in the foreword of this book: "The thought occurred to me that it was not a foreigner who had written this book, but a Russian.

This is because so uniquely and so emotionally does the author feel what the Russian artists have put their emotion into their canvases.” However, in addition to it, if even any one of the artists whose works are introduced in this book confirms concretely that the concerned commentary is very true to the essence of his depicting intention of his pieces illustrated in this book, there will be nothing more helpful than this. If the reader who does not have much self-confidence in how to appreciate paintings knows it, naturally his trust in the commentary will increase and as a result of paying more attention to the contents, he will be able to get from it more hints on how to appreciate paintings and so on. For instance, if you once again read the whole commentary of his works attentively now at this moment, then probably you may realize the characteristic of this artist that was hinted there. Namely, although his high level of portrayal capability is prerequisite conditions for his success, it’s worth mentioning that he has an outstanding scheming ability, based on which he selects the theme and portrayal object and then makes a careful preparation, before or while depicting, about how better the whole composition and the expression of objects are to be devised in order to attain the good result. That’s why his portrayal gets all the more attractive. If you review his works, taking such understanding into your consideration, then I think it shall become a quite unique experience worthy of trying for a fairly deep appreciation of paintings.