

Introduction

For about four years from July 1989 I worked in Moscow as a representative of my company for international logistics, and while living there, thanks to a strange coincidence of circumstances, I happened to have a hobby of appreciating and collecting painting, which came to occupy a large place in my inner life.

The period of my living in Moscow was a great turbulent era in history, involving the collapse of the Soviet Union. The life of the usual Russian people was seriously affected by the drastic changes in systems and laws, and for quite some time, the situation was such that foodstuffs and daily necessities disappeared from the shops. When the attempted coup d'état by VIP of Soviet government took place in August 1991, a barricade of buses and trucks was built on the bridge across the Moscow River in front of the so-called Belui Dom (meaning the White House), which was the Supreme Soviet of Parliament of Russia, one of republics of the USSR (where Yeltsin, the then President of Russian, shut himself in). However, despite these upheavals overturning the foundations of society, the situation did not develop into street fighting and riots which once threatened to break out, and my overall feeling was that in general the city of Moscow had kept calm even throughout my all staying period.

To speak of contemporary Russian realism paintings which are the theme of this book, a lot of paintings constantly appeared in the galleries and they were still close existence to me as a foreigner, which I could manage to buy. Among them there were the works with high artistic value as well, though they were not so many and if you just had the discerning eye to recognize the good pieces, you could collect such works.

I myself didn't have any particular interest in paintings before I lived in Moscow. However, I grew to love them there, frequently appreciating various paintings and to my delightfulness, I found out that I had been endowed with some sensibilities to paintings. That I am the type of person who is easily enthused about things also helped, and I was so enchanted that I became completely absorbed in contemporary Russian paintings. As a result, I ended up collecting more than two hundred pieces, but considering that these paintings were highly praised on the whole not only by myself, but also by two Russian painter friends of mine and two experts of art appraisal of the Russian Ministry of Culture, who actually checked the paintings when I applied for a permit to take them

out of the country at the time of my return to Japan, I pride myself on the collection which, I believe, shows some level of contemporary Russian paintings.

The majority of the works are pure natural landscapes or the pieces depicting the lives of Russian people in nature. I did not have any particular intention to select only these kinds of landscapes, but it was just because nearly 70% of the paintings in the galleries were these kinds of landscapes and among them there were paintings I liked.

I wondered why there were so many natural landscapes. Thinking over the reasons, it came to mind that the lives of the Russian people were very closely connected to nature. Going a little outside Moscow, the extensive woods of white birch or commanding views of arable land or grassland edged with the woods of conifer trees in the distance spread out before your eyes. Coming in contact with such nature, you will feel the stress dissolve spontaneously, as if your soul were cleansed by Mother Nature.

If we think from the viewpoint of the concept of extended family, including grandfather and grandmother, many of ordinary citizens in the cities have *dacha* (summer house), small as they are, outside the city and from April until around the beginning of October, they are in the habit of leisurely spending weekends there, and also taking one or even two months of holiday in the summer, cultivating the vegetable garden, reading books while sunbathing or strolling through the forests. Perhaps that's why so many of them never lose their broad mind and their amiable simplicity. Although the difficulties in making a living did in fact weigh heavily upon them in the time of historic upheavals, the Russian people sought laughter in the world of humor and anecdotes (satirical stories about politics were popular in Soviet Union in the era of Brezhnev) without brooding so much over future anxiety, from which I used to have the impression that they live a tough, sturdy life day by day. For me as Japanese, there were many things to learn from such style of their lives, and it seemed that the artists themselves also lived in the same daily habits, expressing in their pieces the wonder of Mother Nature that has a deep connection with the lives of the Russian people.

My overseas assignment ended and when I brought these paintings home and hung them on the walls of my house, they looked even more attractive in Japan where the absolute amount of light was markedly greater, causing me to admire anew the high artistic level of contemporary Russian paintings. Even now, with the passage of nearly five years, I am not at all tired of viewing these paintings. They ease the depression and stress of work in my heart and are irreplaceable things for me.

However, after my return home, contrary to my expectation I noticed for the first time that Russian paintings had been basically ignored in Japan. With almost no exceptions, there was no possibility to find an art museum that possessed realism paintings of Russian masters and at bookstores as well, although there was no lack of albums for European artists, you could not find any new publications illustrating Russian realism paintings. I checked the literatures of Western art history to find that some books did not even refer to the Russian realism paintings of the second half of the 19th century which seems to me to be of the world level. If there is a book touching on the subject even quite briefly, maybe, I should have welcomed it, thinking it better than nothing, but when I did find such a book, I read it, encouraged by my pleasant finding, and then I felt rather lonesome at simple descriptions, in which names such as Ilya Repin and Vasily Surikov appeared in brief. This situation seems to be of no great difference in Europe and the U.S., but it is definitely not because the artistic value of Russian art is low, but simply because the works are not even the object of evaluation due to a lack of familiarity as well as the fact that the studies of Russian art in the West and in Japan have not progressed to the level of shining a light on this situation.

However, contemporary Russian paintings had been introduced to and thrived in Japan in the 1970s, winning praise, and therefore I think that the Russian paintings most certainly do not cause us Japanese to feel something remote and strange. On the contrary, they are the kind of paintings, in which we feel sympathy and closeness.

As for Japanese artists, I love the paintings of Kaii Higashiyama even to the degrees that you can call me a big fan. I came into contact for the first time with a considerable number of his original works at a special exhibition held at a Tokyo department store in July 1997 to commemorate his 88th birthday, which made a deep impression on me. At the same time, however, I was surprised to see that the mood of these works resembled Russian paintings. Of course, one is Japanese style of paintings and the other—European one. They differ in painting methods. And it is not my intention to make anyone frown by saying that the styles were similar. I am willing to make a concession on this point, but I think that they have something common in what the artists perceived from nature as a matter before the step of painting.

Many of Higashiyama's works have an indescribable quietness suspended in the midst of nature and in this silence there is even a feeling that one can almost hear the sounds of nature's instruments—the echo of a waterfall, the tune of the wind. What is expressed there, rather than the beauty of nature, is the figure of Mother Nature

involving its beauty that awakens somehow a bottomless and mysterious feeling or awe, the mixed emotions of which we can feel quite realistically as if they are getting close by.

Sometimes I have also felt emotions similar to these in the rich hues of the expressions of nature in works of Russian paintings. It is said that in the depths of the Japanese psychology there remain traces of a primitive religion deifying nature. The people of Russia had been also polytheists, seeing gods in the sun and other natural phenomena until the conversion to Christianity in the 10th century, and remnants of this can be seen in folklore and folk tales. Looking at Kaii Higashiyama's special exhibition, the thought suddenly came to me that perhaps Japanese and Russian may have the same like foundations for the viewpoint of nature.

Leaving this aside, I'm sure quite a few Japanese people would be deeply impressed, just like me, by the depictions of nature in Russian paintings, and therefore I can't help feeling it strange and sorry that nowadays in Japan even Russian paintings of the latter half of the 19th century—not to mention contemporary Russian art—cannot attract attention of the people.

The thing is that in three or four years even the slightest change did not occur in this situation and it became my motive for writing a book on contemporary Russian paintings. Faced with the unpopularity of Russian paintings in Japan after my return home, my feelings of nostalgia, lonesomeness, and frustration grew gradually stronger, and I keenly and frequently felt the need to let Japanese people know the merits of Russian paintings.

No matter which object you will take, if you know the true value, admiring it from the bottom of your heart, it is bitter to see the object of your affection attracts absolutely no interest from those around you. My feeling on Russian paintings was just like this, though the reason for their indifference was that they had almost no adequate opportunities to know the true value. Therefore, the more time passed, the greater became my feeling that I should somehow rectify this situation even if a little.

My collection may not be called the most impressive one. However, even so, it includes the works that can cause the readers to feel the beauty of contemporary Russian paintings, and if I myself, charmed by these paintings and actually possessing a considerable number of pieces, do not try to make any appeals for the charm of this art

to change the situation in Japan, where Russian paintings never see the light of day, then who else except me can take up this role? Constantly asking myself such a question, I came to think that I would do something useful for the recognition of the merits of Russian paintings, no matter how small it is.

At first, I dreamed about renting gallery space to show my collection, but since it seemed evident that this effect would be weak and would not last long without doing it as a part of a large-scale project, I gave it up anyway and finally, through a process of elimination, there remained the idea to write a book on contemporary Russian paintings. I worked out a plan in various ways. However, when it came to a writing stage, I found it not so simple. It seemed to me that the only thing I could do at that moment was to show on paper the pieces of contemporary Russian paintings that had so charmed me and with their help try to deliver to readers the beauty of Russian landscapes. This confinement worried me much. I was unsure if I could do something useful with such a plan, but nothing would happen if I didn't try to write at least. So, anyhow I set about writing this book.

As regards the composition of this book, with a view to making it easier to read for people who think they don't understand art or for those unfamiliar with Russian paintings, and also from the standpoint of how I should write a book in order that deep understanding of Russian art can be promoted, I intend to bring first the story about the particulars that I myself who had no special interest in paintings have been charmed by contemporary Russian paintings and then to introduce the works from my own collection.

Because of this structure where the narrative is developed in such a way, I think the aspect of “a tale of my collection” is emphasized, but rather I will attach importance to the consistency of the narrative and intend to show you the pieces step by step in the course of development of this story.

Needless to say, these pieces are shown definitely just as examples to help you to understand what contemporary Russian paintings are and the main task of this consists in grasping the artistic features and disclosing the essential nature of Russian paintings through these examples.

The introduction of the works consists of four chapters; I select suitable pieces for each chapter from four different aspects according to the chapter's objective. In between, I insert the history of Russian art in the second half of the 19th century, and I try to write

so that the general features of contemporary Russian paintings would be clarified as much as possible. As for abstract art, however, because it is only seldom seen in the galleries, I would exclude it from the scope of this book. As regards the realism paintings that are the theme of this book, it seems that there are quite diverse styles of paintings and a variety of different schools. So I'd herewith want to make it clear that the aim of this book is not a comprehensive introduction of overall trends in contemporary Russian art, but is to focus on the works of the traditional realism paintings that comprise the main stream in the painting circles of contemporary Russian art. The reason for this is that, when speaking of contemporary paintings in Russia which correspond to artistic level immediately accepted as international scale, what comes first above all is traditional realism art, and so the main point of this book is to make known somehow the remarkable charm of this painting art.

I could ask no greater pleasure than this modest book helping somehow in your understanding of Russian painting art.