

First meeting

I graduated from university in 1970. That same year, one of leading galleries in Tokyo, which has not already existed due to bankruptcy, introduced to Japan a large number of contemporary Soviet paintings in an exhibition for sale, likely the first time after the World War II ended. (The Soviet Union collapsed and is no more. Considering that the center city for art in the former Soviet Union was Moscow and Saint Petersburg, I will use the general term “Russian paintings” from now on with the intention of avoiding confusion). The exhibition was held in a department store in Sapporo and won favorable reviews. In the spring of 1989, immediately before I was transferred to Moscow, I happened to acquire at a used bookstore the albums for the contemporary Russian art exhibits held in 1973 and 1974 at a Tokyo department store. From the address on the opening pages, I learned that the same kind of exhibit had been held in some provincial town in 1971, and that from 1972 on, the exhibition was held in Tokyo once a year. I keep the albums to look at from time to time, and as far as I judge from these albums, it seems that a lot of excellent paintings were got together especially in 1973.

Thanks to the activities of this gallery, Russian paintings in the 1970s even saw a boom to some extent in Japan. Several books on Russian art were translated into Japanese and introduced in Japan during this time, which seems to have reflected this boom. I heard several years ago from someone who had worked at this gallery that a total of about 20,000 works of contemporary Russian art were sold in Japan. From this number, it's difficult to suppose that they were all good paintings, but certainly some excellent pieces must have been included in them. I believe the gallery did do good work in its own way, and yet it was a great misfortune for Russian paintings that it went bankrupt with the involvement of scandal having no concern with Russian paintings. Afterwards there appeared no real gallery to carry on their work in large scale and the first budding of Russian art having taken root in Japan ruined before its true merit was really understood.

As for myself, I did not have especial interest in paintings until I was transferred to Moscow in 1989. I was almost an outsider to those trends of Russian paintings in the 1970s in Japan.

Under such circumstances, I faintly remember a department store in Tokyo holding an exhibit of modern Russian paintings from Moscow's State Tretyakov Gallery (as it proved later, it was in 1976.) Although I actually did not go to the exhibition, I saw a

poster or something like that advertising it, with a painting of a lady in a black overcoat and a black hat adorned with white feathers, sitting in an open coach. I remember I felt a touch of longing for the exotic beauty of the lady wearing sorrow in her black eyes. Much later, I learned that this was the masterpiece *Portrait of an Unknown Woman* (1883) by the painter Ivan Kramskoi (1837–1887) of the Union of Itinerant Exhibitions in the latter half of the 19th century. Since this piece, translated in Japan as *Unforgettable Woman*, was an enlarged photograph and not the original painting, I may not say in a strictest sense that this was the first Russian painting I saw.

As for the Russian painting which I saw in original for the first time, and it occurred a little bit earlier than this, in 1970, I can mention *Rye* (1878) by the landscape painter Ivan Shishkin (1832–1898), active in the same period as Kramskoi. The piece depicts a tranquil rural landscape, where spreads out a vast field with ripe rye tilting golden heads of heavy grain and from the middle distance towards the background of its field ten or so large pine trees with shapely branches grow sparsely, standing as if they rose up against the clear autumn sky. Also, in the foreground a farm road leading through the rye field, pushing the rye right and left, exposes itself to us. On the very road with the wheel track left by a cart beating down the low grasses, just at this moment, the shadow casts are following after two swallows flying low in nimble flight.

I saw this famous painting in Russia at Moscow's State Tretyakov Gallery or at Saint Petersburg's State Russian Museum when I visited Moscow and other cities as an assistant tour guide, while working at a small travel agency specializing in the former Soviet Union for about six months just after graduating from university. As soon as I climbed the stairs and entered the exhibition hall, this piece was hung directly in front of me. My memory of where I saw it is now uncertain (recently I visited the State Tretyakov Gallery and looked for this exhibition hall in the old building, but was unable to find any place that resembled it), but I remember very clearly even now how rye field unexpectedly caught my eye just as I entered the hall, and it did make a strong impact on me.

Each ear of rye with its detailed distinctness closed in on me and the overwhelming number of shining golden ears dazzled my eyes. A thrill ran down my spine and as though paralyzed, I remained in that position for I don't know how many seconds.

Although later, too, I have several times had the experience that an excellent painting made my hair stand on end and shivers run down my spine, my body being deaf to my commands was the first and last experience.

The flight of the swallows capturing the moment of flying near the ground and the serene appearance of the farm road remind me of the scenery of my own childhood imprinted in my heart and in this sense too, this painting is intimate for me. Many years later, I looked up the size of the painting in the album and got an unexpected feeling. It is a work done on a long canvas of 107×187 cm, which is not so large for a Russian painting, but in my memory, it looked at least three times bigger. This is likely because, rather than appreciating the painting, I had a psychological experience to it then as though I stepped across the frame and entered into the landscape depicted there. Perhaps due to the intense impression having received from this painting, strangely enough I have had no memory of the other pieces I must have seen in the museum then.

Afterwards, because of the reconstructions of the Tretyakov Gallery, the owner of Rye, I did not have the opportunity to see the piece again for a long time, including while I was living in Moscow, but when I visited Moscow and other cities for private trip in July 1997, finally I was able to see it again. I reconfirmed my impression that this is quite excellent piece, and I was very moved, but my previous deep experience of a physical impact unfortunately did not reoccur.

As for the first piece of contemporary Russian paintings I encountered, it was a fairly impressive work. The subsidiary company of the gallery that I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter dealt in trade with the former Soviet Union, and from time to time I visited to get the work of export shipment. I became relatively close with the person in charge, and one day around 1987 at the time of my sales visit to him, I was suddenly invited into a special room of the gallery adjacent to the office, where I was shown some excellent pieces of contemporary Russian paintings. Because the person in charge of selling the paintings stood beside me, ready to answer any of my questions, I wasn't able to relax and appreciate them, which is a shame when I think of it now. I particularly liked one of the pieces there, so I even asked about the price. Therefore it remains still very clearly in my memory. It was an oil painting of a bit longer canvas, about 50×80 cm, expressing the scenery close to evening. In the background there was the opposite coast of a river with a low hill, behind which the sun was going to sink. A deep green forest on the hill and the ripples on the river surface from the middle

distance to the foreground were shining with the glow of the sunset and in the midst of quietness all the scenery looked beautiful and harmonious. I will never forget the rich hues of the quiet evening in that piece. Later when I was looking at the albums of the contemporary Russian art exhibitions I mentioned earlier, I realized that this painting resembled a work by the Russian (republic) People's Artist Nikolai Osenev (1909–1983) called *Quiet Evening*. I think it was certainly the same painting and even now I'm eager to see it once more to appreciate it in detail, but this is likely an unrealized dream nowadays.