

## **The first painting**

I worked in Moscow for about four years, from July 1989 to May 1993. This period was a turbulent era in history, in which President Gorbachev, with the aim of changeover to democratization and a market economy, pushed forward with the movement of perestroika, but in the confusion ensuing from repeated trial and error, the country saw an ongoing economic slump, eventually followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union.

By the way, it seemed that Mr. Gorbachev, in the point that he changed the era with his fairness and foresight and in the tragedy due to being so ahead of his time, has something in common with Russian great writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century I love so much. He quickly perceived that the Soviet Union without any reforms would only fall further behind the developed countries of the West, and also he was well aware of the meaninglessness of the arms race which was ruining the economy. Therefore, with a new thinking of diplomacy, he led the world to peaceful coexistence away from the Cold War of bipolar confrontation between the US and the USSR, his achievement of which cannot be overestimated. However domestically, as everybody knows, hindered by a deeply rooted bureaucracy and the privileged classes, his will to reconstruct the economy had to be given up halfway without bearing any real fruit, leading to his reluctant resignation. Attacked by both conservatives and progressives, the faith of the Russian citizens in Gorbachev was lost completely, but history won't abandon him. I cannot say when, but I am certain that a time will surely come when his foresight will be properly understood, and his undertaking will be justly evaluated in Russia as well.

Living in Moscow in this turbulent era, I had the invaluable experience of watching on the sidelines how everything—system, laws, value standards and others—was overturned in a very short time, and how people were hit squarely with these direct effects in everyday life. The rules changed variedly, and people, liberated from their restraints, really felt their freedom and discussed social change with heated anticipation. However, as time went by, prices skyrocketed and shortages became severe. The majority of people, not surprisingly, were unable to change their ways of living, thinking, and former value standard so quickly in conformity with radical changes handed down from above, and most responded passively to the great waves of

the era. How to maintain and defend their lives became a significant, daily issue for people, and they, putting work aside, stood in long lines to obtain daily necessities. A little later, it also became everyday occurrences that people stand on the sidewalk to sell things to passers-by.

People working as artists were not exempted from this. Rather, precisely because they focused their attention on the pursuit of their own artistry and a depth of expression, no doubt they must have experienced so much these daily hardships. However, I can imagine that these came to them later than ordinary people. As long as their paintings were sold in the galleries, one of their sales channels, there was no problem.

The artists first affected by the change of the era were likely those who belong to the first rate artists. The state regularly ordered the works of these top artists, and in exchange for having their daily needs taken care of, the artists were not permitted to sell their works in regular galleries. (Also approximately until the first half of the 1980s, it was not permitted, as a rule, to take the works of about a hundred designated artists out of the country from the standpoint of preserving cultural property). When disorder appeared in the national art buying system, the works of some of these top-tier artists began to trickle into the regular galleries so that the artists might make a living. I heard that one gallery was even temporarily shut down once this was discovered by the authorities.

The time when I was stationed in Moscow seemed to coincide just with the period in which the most plentiful paintings were circulated in the galleries. Afterward, in the latter half period of my stay in Moscow, galleries having been frequented by foreign tourists and business people were unable to sell paintings very well because of changes in the national regulations on taking paintings out of the country. I'll revert to this matter in the later chapter.

It was in this period that I came to Moscow alone as the first Japanese head of a one-man office. For the first year, an office and a living space were set up for me in a hotel for long-term stays. My living space with 2DK(two rooms and dining kitchen) was situated in building adjacent to my office building and the window of about 15-square-meter living room faced south, and so received a good deal of light. One clear April holiday in 1990, after I had become accustomed to my work and was a

little bit free of strain, in which life in Moscow had held me, I was relaxed absentmindedly in the living room, when I suddenly noticed a bare state of the room. The plain white wall opposite the sofa was vacant except for partly occupied only by the stereo set, and besides, a single calendar hanging in the corner. Then I remembered that an acquaintance, who works for a certain manufacturer and had already experienced his station life in Moscow, once told me that he had collected the dozens of lithographs while living in this city, and I hit on the idea that hanging some picture might bring a little warmth to my daily life.

By the way, I don't care for room decorated with flowers. I can get comfort from looking at flowers in vase at longest for the first day or so, but after that, seeing their vigor fade little by little each day is a source of anxiety for me, which, therefore, relatively damps my pleasure of looking at flowers. So from the outset, I had no idea of having flowers in the apartment, but wanted to hang a picture.

A short time later, I visited a Russian gallery for the first time. Usually the gallery has the name "Art Salon" instead of "Gallery", which sounds more exclusively. It cannot be helped that the appearance of the shop does not look like a high class gallery for Japanese eyes. However, the paintings they sell are the fairly good pieces of art and befit the exclusive tone of the common name of gallery in Russian language.

The gallery I visited first time was on the left-hand side of the road in the direction of the Kremlin about twenty meters after Lenin Avenue straddled the inner loop road. Since this is situated in diagonal direction from October Square, we Japanese staying in Moscow called it the October Gallery, that was a place often visited by foreign tourists and the like. A large gallery in the shape of a long rectangle with the entrance in the center, and the exhibition area was split to the left and right. A lot of paintings were hung closely to one another everywhere on the walls, wherever there was the wall, and also were put against the walls wherever it was possible. It seemed that altogether there were a little over three hundred pieces. Most of them were oil paintings, while we could see watercolors and lithographs, though they were in small numbers. Also in this gallery not only paintings but also painting materials, souvenirs such as folk handcrafts, dyed goods with patterns causing us to feel an aesthetic taste (cloth screens kept on a wooden frames), and carpets were on sale. The large window facing the street was shielded with a white transparent curtain, and the

inside was just a little dim since the lights were not turned on during the day. After looking around for a long time, I selected an oil painting with size of 70 x 90 cm to take it home with me.

I hung this piece in the center of a white wall in my living room, so that I would come face to face with it every day. It was a painting by the artist Andrey Ovcharov (1926–1994, member of Russian Artists' Union) called *Foggy Morning* (year of production 1989, Oil on board, 70 x 90 cm.) (You can see this picture on the front hard-cover of this book). The piece depicts a boy holding a fishing line, sitting alone on the shore of a lake early in a summer morning with an opalescent fog not yet cleared up by the sun. Near the boy juts out from the shore into the lake a little bit decayed, wooden platform for drawing water and ahead of it the surface of the water spreads out across the canvas, with trees near and far on the opposite shore of the lake looking smoky and hazy in the fog.

Strangely, I can stare at this painting endlessly, unlike the photograph. Looking at the details as if I made my way deep into the picture, which made me imagine in various ways, I somehow began to have a feeling that I am strolling about in this painting. What I realized first while sitting on the sofa to look at the painting for a short time after dinner and so on was that the hue of the colors responded subtly to light and the painting looked different, slightly as it was. The impression I got from the painting varied slightly each time I looked at it—morning, noon, or night—depending on the amount of light of the room. Each time I somehow discovered something new and so it caused me to expect that I could find something else. Such being the case, I came to appreciate the painting, changing the distance and angle from which I view it.

I think a painting has a definite viewpoint from which it looks best. In general, a work can look attractive when you step back to look at it from some distance. I got the best results for *Foggy Morning* when looking at it diagonally from the doorway to the bedroom with a distance of about six meters. In short, this spot was the maximum distance I could take from the painting in my apartment. If I went any further, I would end up inside the bedroom and I could see the painting no longer.

One day, looking at the piece from this position, I sensed a power in the lake's

surface and had the impression as if the water surface was expanding left and right, and backward to the opposite shore, when the memory of a picnic with a few friends somewhere to a lake in my student days some decades ago suddenly came back to me. While walking together towards the lake, unexpectedly from far away there appeared a part of water surface through a open yard between the house and thicket of trees. Reflectively I felt at last we had got to the lake and breathed a sigh of relief. This water surface was full of a power that made me feel as if it expands further beyond the framework cut by the scene and I sensed the same power in the lake in this painting. I understood then through this first piece of Russian art that a painting has such a interesting world. So I paid much more attention to this piece, which naturally caused me to understand the essence of the paintings more deeply.

Since I took up art appreciation, I have also turned my attention to natural scenery. Observing a grove of trees while taking a walk in the evening, I understood that the appearance of the trees wrapped in a haze in *Foggy Morning* was a perfect likeness of this grove. I was deeply impressed with such skill of artist that he indeed reproduced the result of his observation quite perfectly, and another time I noticed with surprise that the ground with the sparse grasses gently sloping down to the right in the foreground of the piece had a depth broader than at first glance, abounding with a ruggedness, in all of which the feel of deep reality was expressed.

What most attracted my attention in *Foggy Morning* was the boy fishing. At first, I only admired the preciseness of molding expression of this boy sitting on the grass, but as I looked at him, I began to be captured by a question or curiosity as to why the boy wears a white hat in the morning mist. Maybe, was the hat unnecessary or had it any other meaning? Or what the boy thinks while fishing? The figure sitting, looking down as he fishes, also looks like the pose of a person with worries. His appearance reminds me of the famous work *Christ in the Wilderness* (1872) by Ivan Kramskoi, one of the finest Russian painters of the latter half of the 19th century. In this painting, Christ is sitting on one of rocks in the wilds, meditating in isolation. The anguished expression on his face, as he was in conflict with his conscience because of his deep love for the people, is said to express simultaneously the agony of Russian intellectuals of the artist's time. The boy hangs his head towards the lake, turning his

face downward, so we cannot see his expression, but in this piece produced in 1989, the artist of *Foggy Morning* likely laid the anxiety about the future in the midst of the chaos of Russian society onto the boy.

Looking at this boy who has the pose of a person with anxiety, I superimposed my own personal agony, which have absolutely no connection with the painting, and vaguely thought of myself. At other times, it seemed to me that the white hat the boy wears was a symbol to deny such worries. Anyone would sense a touch of loneliness in a boy fishing alone in a foggy lake and thus see worry in him, but depending on my own mood, I feel that the white hat is simply to ease this loneliness and was probably just added for balance. In this way, I view same painting every day and never grow tired of it. It's almost as if I'm looking at the actual scene through the window of the picture frame.

I bought the painting with the thought of finding some way to comfort myself in my lonely life in Moscow, having little room for a pastime, but I found a much greater comfort than I had expected, which caused me to have a desire to make a nail set in the white wall with each of the blank spaces to the right and left of the *Foggy Morning* so that I could hang there two more pictures which I like. That's why, almost by chance, appreciating and buying paintings from time to time were added to quite small number of my hobbies.