

The search for good paintings

On Saturdays, I often made the rounds of the galleries. Usually I haunted four galleries, my basic visiting course of which was roughly like this: there was a gallery looking out on Lenin Avenue, just over five minutes from my apartment by car, and I generally started from there. Then I went up Lenin Avenue towards the center of Moscow to the October Gallery, then past the Kremlin to the Petrovka Gallery behind the Bolshoi Theater and finally, the Kutozov Gallery behind my office.

In general, if the display area is not brightly lit, a painting will look dark and unattractive, but no matter which gallery you take, they hang white lace curtains in the windows and put off the lights during the day, as if they have prearranged it together. I often heard a remark from Japanese people living in Moscow or having experience to live there about how dark and gloomy Russian paintings are. I also heard secondhand that a Japanese artist who had visited Moscow suspected that the paintings were dark because the paint was of poor quality. Looking at the works exhibited in the new State Tretyakov Gallery in the same building as the Central Artists' House, it is certainly true that many paintings in Stalin era are dark, perhaps reflecting his time, but recent contemporary Russian pieces are definitely not dark. Nevertheless, if such impression is strong, it can be attributed to the dim light of the room where the paintings are exhibited.

However, certainly there exists a reason why the shops are kept so dim. It is bright enough for Russian people. I realized this because my first office which was located in the long-term hotel wanted sunlight and it was dim in the daytime, and so I used to turn on my desk lamp to save my eyesight, while one day my secretary asked me to turn it off, reasoning that it was bad for the eyes. In contrast to Japanese, Russian people seem to have eyes such that they find bright places dazzling and are able to see perfectly well in darker places. People who know Moscow very well may say; "Oh, yes. That reminded me of something." This explains why the lights are not turned on in the departure or arrival lobby of the Sheremetyevo-2 Airport even though in the daytime it is so dark that it seems to be meager for an international airport, the front door to the country. And with this same explanation we can also understand why the main lights of a Russian car driving through the streets of Moscow, which had been

once dimly lit at night till several years before as if the poles of street lamp were insufficiently equipped with, are remarkably dark compared with Japanese vehicles (the high beams that project the lights into the distance, however, are as bright as those of Japanese counterparts), and why at dusk in a summer evening, quite many cars drive with only their small lights on. When I was first transferred to the city, Japanese vehicles were still rare on Moscow roads, and because the lights of the Japanese vehicles brought in here without changing the brightness and high angle for use in Japan were too bright for Russian people, drivers of oncoming vehicles were dazzled, and almost always flashed their lights, signaling for the driver to turn off the lights immediately.

In any case, paintings which look bright enough to Russian people in the dim galleries look rather dark to us Japanese, night-blinded in the dark because we are used to live in bright places. Contemporary Russian paintings in particular tend not to show up well in dark places, while they are sensitive to light. To adjust the level of brightness to the eyes of Japanese, a little bit brighter light is needed so as to evaluate the true value of the paintings. Therefore, taking this into consideration, it is essential to compensate for lack of brightness in your mind when viewing the piece. If you keep this in your mind and look at it carefully, then you are able to distinguish good paintings even in the dimness.

Russian contemporary paintings were represented by quite various genres, covering religious painting, history painting, genre picture, portraiture, nude, landscape, still life, abstract and others, as if all oil painting genres gathered together in one place and the styles of expression were extensive and diverse. Nevertheless, the majority of the exhibits in the galleries were the realism paintings of landscape and still-life, with others seen only occasionally.

Aside from it, I think there were several galleries specializing in abstract art. I can see the virtues of abstract art, but it did not arouse enough concern in me, compared with representational art, so I visited two or so of these galleries with a friend, but I had never gone there voluntarily with my own will.

As for watercolor paintings, from time to time I saw good pieces, which had their own world of gentle color tones and high level of transparency peculiar to watercolors,

but I could not help feeling in these works a lack of something with regard to a feel of scale and the sensitive nuances of color tones which it is quite difficult to express with watercolors. During my staying period in Moscow, I saw a variety of pieces that interested me, but in the end, I didn't come across anything I was attracted strongly enough to acquire. However, this only means that I viewed the paintings through the filter of what I would choose if I selected one from among the pieces that were well done, without caring about the means of expression or the genre of the piece. Oil paintings seemed to have a larger range of expression when considered in the same criteria, and if I compared two excellent pieces, the oil painting somehow had the advantage. But essentially, watercolors and oils should be regarded as different means of expression, and in this sense, I'd like to add that there are definitely high level of watercolor pieces deserving attention among Russian watercolor paintings.

At the four galleries I frequently visited, about seven hundred oil paintings were on display. Once a week, half of the exhibits were changed for new paintings, with the remaining half replaced in the second week. The system was such that the change usually took place on Friday evening so that you could see new paintings on Saturday. No doubt, Saturday was a good day for sales at the galleries. This means about 1400 paintings were on display in a month. However, some of these kept their place for a while without being replaced as a rule, while it happened that I couldn't go to the galleries some week, or some paintings were likely sold before I got to see them. Therefore, it turned out that most probably I saw a little bit less than a thousand paintings a month. All of the displayed paintings were of a certain level and on the whole they were such that you would not be making a big mistake whichever one you will choose. However, among them, there was a considerable difference between particularly excellent pieces and those that were rather mediocre, giving us the impression that they were the mixture of good and bad. Naturally, the ratio of gems was small, but the artistic level of those gems was quite good. And even among the gems, there were even fewer paintings powerful enough that one would want to have always nearby, looking without ever getting tire of them; these were the paintings not always encountered at ordinary galleries.

Since the galleries were closed on Sundays, I used to go to museums or art bazaar (market) in the open air. Although I said art bazaar, they put up the paintings by the wayside for sale among other vendors who dealt with things such as wristwatches,

matryoshka dolls (typical Russia wooden dolls; created getting a clue from Japanese kokeshi dolls, the different-sized doll is put inside other according to the order of size), icons and stamp and badge collections. The paintings were sold, for the most part, by the artists themselves who painted them, but I once came across a mother selling painting done by her art student son.

A place I frequented first was the bazar of Izmailovsky Park, where in a forest of white birches street stands were crowded together on both sides of the path for about fifty meters along a promenade. Young Russian couples pushing strollers or holding the hand of a small child dropped by to take pleasure in evaluating the items for sale.

Then, a little bit later, I learned that the said bazar had moved to other place in Izmailovsky Park from the forest, so the next time on I headed there. In a new market place with no shade, surrounded by a high fence of wire mesh, there appeared a lot of traders selling Central Asian carpets and it certainly had the bazar atmosphere with a constant jam of people. As a result, however, the number of paintings on display had decreased.

That's why naturally I stopped visiting there, because the bazar location was far from my apartment. In the meantime, art vendors who seemed to have been forced out of Izmailovsky park bazar lined up on the sidewalk by the October Gallery, and I frequently stopped over at this place on the way to the galleries or museums. The art vendors were haunted by Moscow residents, tourists and business people from abroad and prospered there for about a year or so, but afterward they moved to the open air, ten minutes away from there on foot, in front of the square of the Central Artists' house situated opposite Gorky Park across the inner loop road.

The art bazar was first recommended to me by a Russian friend, who advertised that it has many good paintings, so I went with expectations. In general the paintings must look better outdoors in broad daylight. However, my honest impression was that the general level was considerably lower than at the galleries. I thought perhaps the good paintings had been sold out in the morning since I had gone there in the afternoon. So I tried to arrive as early as possible from next time on, but it seemed that this was also not the case. About two hundred pieces were displayed in all; among them there were copies of famous paintings from museums. They were oil paintings for the most part, of a variety of genres, including abstract and religious paintings,

with diverse styles. However, speaking about the genre, landscape was in the majority.

As for this landscape, the artists who painted them should have had some artistic power in their own way. However, I was concerned about the point that too many works gave the impression that they were painted just for sale or, in other words, the pieces had been done rather in easy-going way, with crucial steps omitted. In general the basic drawing was powerful enough. Therefore, I regretted all the more, because the handling of the colors was too beautiful to spoil the overall painting, which ended up as something different from reality. The mainstream of contemporary Russian paintings is the traditional realism of the latter half of the 19th century, and to put it simply, this is a technique for reproducing nature, the streets of a town and other aspects of the real world in line with reality. This painting also follows the traditions of realism. However, in order to express what you perceived from reality you should depict them with more soul or, in other words, you should add a greater variety of colors in conformity with what the senses require, while, in this case, I feel that these landscapes had been done quickly and uniformly with little investment of time, using beautiful colors to attract the eyes at a glance.

To tell the truth, the colors used by the artists are the very important point distinguishing expert painters from non-expert. Although it may be a thin line, this difference is a large gap that cannot be filled without talent and effort. It is quite obvious that such way of depicting just for sale won't improve the artist's ability in any way. Personally I'd like them to challenge themselves, always trying to do more than they are able to do.

Nearly at the end of my time in Moscow, a Russian artist friend of mine told me that galleries had been managed by the Artists' Union of the USSR (which disappeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and its functions were passed on to artists' union in each of the independent republics. To avoid confusion from now on, I will refer to the Artists' Union of Russia except for the case when it is necessary to specify the Artists' Union of the USSR) as a channel for sales of members' works. Therefore, non-member artists were locked out from these galleries and had no choice but to sell their paintings in the street.

However, it was not always the case that there appeared no decent pieces at street

stalls. Thus, the artist friend with his whiskers and beard, who once taught painting at an art school and was a lovable man with cheerful personality, making us feel that he had a broad mind reminiscent of Mother Earth of Russia, on the occasion of telling me the aforesaid story about the galleries, spoke enthusiastically and forcibly on the success story of the street artist. It seems that there was one artist who spent many years selling his paintings at the street stalls. After long years of obscurity, however, his ability was at last recognized and all of a sudden, he became a famous painter. This friend did not directly say that the street stalls also had good paintings, but maybe he likely wanted to through the emphasis he placed on this episode. Anyhow, putting his story aside, I'm aware that there were passable works at the street stalls, though they were few in number. I came across some pieces that interested me there several times, and in fact, I even purchased some of them.

I'm sorry for the old data, but according to the information of 1974 there were about 8,000 painters in the member of the former Union of Artists of the USSR and 7,000 artists were waiting for the result of their application for the membership. Naturally these figures were somewhat different from those at the time of my first stay in Moscow, but roughly speaking, there were likely no major changes. With the enormous candidates, there was plenty of room for artists rarely seen at the street stalls to spontaneously join and show their paintings brimming with talent, and therefore, partly because of expecting such probability, I used to go there occasionally (however, when I moved to Moscow a second time in 1998, I realized that as a result of the galleries of the Artists' Union gradually being forced to be curtailed or closed down some shops from 1993 on, relatively good paintings began to appear at the street stalls, and so the painting situation there seems to have changed somewhat in recent years. So I'd appreciate if you understand this situation described as above is my impression from the first period of my stay in Moscow).

The more you have the experience to appreciate paintings, the deeper you will understand it naturally. Of course for this it is important to look at a great number of excellent pieces, but at the same time, you also need to view paintings with defects, by dint of which you will come to realize how difficult painting art is, which requires both talent and a long period of apprenticeship.

Generally speaking, Russian landscape painters have a solid foundation giving the impression that they are able to depict not only people, but also still life in their own

way and yet it does not mean that they are always able to depict their objects excellently. With the surging flow of a river, it is not easy to express the power of the water, and depicting such objects as a moving person, a fast-running horse etc., so that they could have reality and vigor is similarly difficult. I sometimes come across in the galleries historical paintings showing groups of people, but usually I feel something was missing in the depiction of the people. A person's mass is not expressed well unless the shades of colors are deep enough. If there is water in shouldered bucket, the painting must be such that the weight of the bucket full of water is felt; if empty, the figure carrying the bucket naturally changes. Even when these kinds of things were done well, occasionally I would come across some paintings that looked somehow disharmony and constrained because the composition is not appropriate. In terms of effectively expressing the aim of depicting, the composition, as a general rule, should be made so that it looked spacious enough and more attractive, but occasionally having seen failures, I see that it is certainly not easy to accomplish the tasks as they aimed all the time.

The works of a high artistic level overcome all of these difficult points, and thus embody excellently the three important elements of composition, form, and color balance. Of these three, matters related to color are the most difficult to learn and seem to be deeply linked to the artist's natural talent.

In any case, while appreciating the paintings, I took the time to look for good pieces and collected my favorites little by little. In the following chapters, I'll like to introduce some of my collection selected objective-wise.