

ART; In a Far Desert, a Startling Trove of Art

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THE BLEAK DESERT THAT SURROUNDS THIS TOWN stretches for hundreds of miles in every direction, with only an occasional fly-infested truck stop to break the monotony of sand dunes and forlorn camels. Nukus itself is unimpressive, a Soviet-style town with negligible charm or culture. And even for those who bother to penetrate this far into the desolate heart of Central Asia, it is easy to overlook a shabby wooden building that bears a small sign proclaiming it to be an art museum.

The long, white two-story structure and an annex, their paint peeling, are set on adjacent corners in an anonymous neighborhood. At the entrance, an elderly gentleman in a faded security guard's uniform sits in the sun and looks up at visitors but says nothing.

These days, however, visitors to Uzbekistan are coming to this museum more frequently, even making special trips here from Tashkent, the capital, or from abroad. Six years after Uzbekistan emerged as an independent nation, an astonishing tale has begun to spread from Nukus through the art world. In this quintessentially remote spot sits an enormous collection of art from the Russian avant-garde, overflowing with works of which Western art lovers are almost completely ignorant.

But as more Westerners see the Nukus collection, or parts of it, like the large selection that will be shown in France beginning this week, their understanding of the burst of creativity in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century will surely be enriched.

The museum is hardly an ideal showcase, with lighting poor when it works at all and not a bench in sight. Almost every inch of wall space is covered with paintings, most of them crudely framed, ranging from sweeping landscapes to somber portraits, from abstract studies to haunting nudes.

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Aleksei Rybnokov's 'Apocalypse,' an angular picture of a man on horseback carrying a long trumpet, combines bold mastery of color and composition with great delicacy of expression. Another jewel of the collection, Yevgeny Lysenko's 'Bull,' a picture of a bull painted almost entirely in blue, is both whimsical and powerful, its soft tones contrasting with a bright pattern of rectangles that decorates one of the bull's exaggerated horns.

Among the more political works is 'Capital,' by Mikhail Kurzin, which portrays a grotesque bourgeois couple against a background of tiny, darkly painted workers and is reminiscent of the creations of Otto Dix or George Grosz. There are also good selections of works by Robert Rafailovich Falk and Liubov Popova, both of whom will be represented in the French show.

Two artists in the collection, Solomon Nikritin and Ivan Kudrashov, whose work has been exhibited at museums like the Guggenheim in New York, are known to most art lovers through only a few dozen pictures. The Nukus museum has 560 of their works, a quantity that may lead to a full reassessment of their careers.

'It's a very important collection, a treasure,' said Charlotte Douglas, chairman of the Russian studies department and professor of Russian art at New York University, who combed through Russian catalogues to learn what she could about the Nukus museum. 'There are wonderful artists people have never heard of, including many women, and great works from artists we thought we understood but now realize we don't. It shows that you don't really know half of what's out there.'

Some specialists in Russian art are less enthusiastic. Zelfira Tregulova, a Moscow curator who has seen works from the collection at exhibitions in Moscow, said she suspected there were better collections in provincial Russian cities. John Bowl, a professor of Russian art at the University of Southern California, pointed out that the best-known figures in 20th-century Russian art were represented poorly or not at all in Nukus.

'As a story it's amazing, but visually I think it's very uneven,' said Mr. Bowl, who, like many of his colleagues, knows the collection from selective catalogues. 'Many of the works are secondary because they come from later periods and don't really reflect aspects of the avant-garde. If you're

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looking for major new works by Malevich, Kandinsky or Chagall, they're not there. It will certainly expand our knowledge by giving us new names and new images, but it may not be very startling or exciting.''

The Western public will have a chance to judge for itself starting on Thursday, when an exhibition of more than 300 pieces from Nukus opens at the Abbaye aux Dames, a medieval convent in Caen, France. The show, which is scheduled to be inaugurated either by President Jacques Chirac or Mrs. Chirac, runs through March 18. There are also hopes, though no firm plans, for an exhibition in the United States.

The art produced in Russia during the first quarter of this century had a profound influence on everything we now know as modern. A brilliant constellation of gifted artists emerged at a time when many Russians believed they were on the brink of a new epoch, one in which the human spirit would be truly liberated for the first time. Seeking to convey their excitement, they produced a body of work whose originality was so extraordinary that the Soviet system proved unable to tolerate it.

In one of the great tragedies of art history, the Russian avant-garde was crushed in the early 1930's. Its exponents were silenced, imprisoned, exiled, driven mad or murdered. Today in Nukus, however, they not only survive but triumph.

Building such a collection at a time when mere possession of these works meant risking imprisonment or worse could only have been a work of madness, and in fact it was the product of one man's grand obsession. The man was Igor Savitsky, born in 1915 to an aristocratic family in Kiev. As a teen-ager he decided to remain behind and study painting at the Moscow Art Institute when most of his family moved westward. When the institute was evacuated to the Uzbek town of Samarkand in 1943, he came with it.

The Central Asian culture fascinated Savitsky much as Polynesia had fascinated Gauguin. He completed his studies in 1946 and returned to Moscow, but in 1950 he seized a chance to travel back to Central Asia with an archeological expedition. Soon afterward he moved permanently to Nukus.

SAVITSKY BEGAN collecting ancient artifacts, some of them dating from the third century B.C. Later he broadened his interest to

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include folk art and ethnography. He traveled from village to village persuading peasant families to sell or give him traditional costumes, jewelry and other artifacts that in the Stalinist era were considered signs of backwardness and possible treason. In 1966 he opened a museum to display his collection. Already, however, he had set his sights on bigger game.

During the 1960's and 70's, Savitsky scoured Moscow, Leningrad and other Soviet cities in search of works by Russian artists who had died unknown, some in labor camps or mental hospitals. Gradually he won the trust of widows and relatives, many of whom were happy to be rid of piles of rotting work. In one case he rescued an oil painting being used to patch a leaky roof.

Savitsky, who died in 1984, had the advantage of working almost without competition. Most Soviet museums were forbidden to display avant-garde art because the Government considered it not only hideous but degenerate. The few private collectors of the period bought no more than a handful of works. Only Savitsky, whose base in the Uzbek region of Karakalpakstan was almost unimaginably far from the centers of Soviet power, was allowed to collect, and he did so with boundless passion.

One of the most extraordinary aspects of Savitsky's method was that he wanted not just the best work but everything. Often he came away with several hundred drawings, prints and paintings by a single artist, showing not just mature work but what he called the artist's ''kitchen'' of phases and experiments. As a result, the Nukus museum demonstrates the development of individual artists as well as of the entire Russian avant-garde, a perspective perhaps broader than that of any other collection.

Many broken artists or their survivors gave Savitsky their collections without charge. To pay for others, he sold his possessions. When he could no longer pay, he wrote i.o.u.'s. By the time he died, Savitsky had accumulated more than 80,000 pieces. His collecting absorbed him completely, leaving him often sick and, in the end, without family. On his deathbed he turned to the daughter of a close friend and told her that she must succeed him as director.

''At first I was shocked that he would make such a suggestion,'' said the woman, Marinika Babanazarova, in her office at the museum. ''I was a teacher of English philology. But at that time there was no demand for English philologists, and it was obvious

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that someone had to take on the job of keeping Savitsky's collection together. I told him I would do my best.'

The Nukus museum has space to display only about 2,000 works. The rest are stored in conditions just short of appalling, stacked together on open shelves and piled in wooden boxes made by a local carpenter. Storage rooms are cold in the winter and hot in the summer. During the hottest months, staff members lay trays of cold water on the floors to bring the temperature down.

Temperature is not the only threat. Slowly recognizing the collection's value, descendants of some artists represented in Nukus have sued the museum or written letters threatening to sue. They assert that Savitsky took works under false pretenses, deceived ignorant widows and failed to honor his i.o.u.'s.

Just as ominous are reports, never officially confirmed, that the Russian authorities are looking for a way to take possession of the whole Savitsky collection. One says the Russians have quietly offered Uzbekistan \$2 million for it, a small fraction of its open-market value. Another report has it that the Russians are willing to return many items taken from Uzbekistan over the decades, including the gilded throne of the Emir of Khiva, now in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, if the Uzbeks will send them the Nukus collection.

But Ms. Babanazarova is a formidable figure and determined to protect her collection at all costs. In her 13 years as director of the museum, she has come to know the collection intimately and gives the impression that no one could pry it from her.

Local government officials in Nukus and in Tashkent have only good things to say about the museum, which is officially called the Igor Savitsky State Art Museum of Karakalpakstan. They say they recognize its worth, are proud of it and will soon begin to give it the resources it needs.

'The collection has tremendous educational value as well as significance for the entire art world,' said Bekbergen Bekturdiyev, deputy prime minister of Karakalpakstan.

'Unfortunately there is only enough space to show a small portion of it. We want to change that, and we have started construction of a new six-story building behind the present site. Finally the collection will have the home it deserves.'

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Plans for a new building -- three stories high, not six -- were first announced in 1971. Construction was begun in 1976 and has continued sporadically. The planned building is modern only by Soviet standards of the 1970's, and in any case there is no evidence to support Mr. Bekturdiev's assertion that it will be ready in a year.

One of the few Western art historians to visit the Nukus museum is Christina Lodder, a specialist in Russian art who teaches at St. Andrews University in Scotland. She made her trip in 1974, when much of the museum's collection was still considered too subversive to show, and is eagerly awaiting the chance to see more of it.

'People are going to be astonished,' Ms. Lodder said. 'There are some tremendously important works there that are going to change our ideas.' Ms. Lodder said she doubted that the Uzbek government would provide substantial support for the museum 'because it's a foreign culture for them.'

'It's forever associated with the Russian yoke,' she continued. 'It's not Uzbek culture, so it's not a priority for them.'

Most outsiders who are now working to bring the Nukus museum to world attention discovered it by accident. Among them is the French Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Jean-Claude Richard, who was touring the country's various regions when he found himself with an hour to kill in Nukus.

'When I walked in for the first time I felt as if I had stumbled into Ali Baba's cave,' Mr. Richard said. 'There is nothing like it in the world. I decided to do something about it.'

MR. RICHARD SUMMONED several specialists from Paris, including two from the Louvre, and with their help prepared to exhibit a large sampling of the collection at museums in France. Curators in Caen 'grabbed it first,' he said, and offered to pay all expenses in exchange for the honor of showing the collection before anyone else.

The French tour will not constitute the true Western premiere of the Nukus collection. In 1995, the Stadtische Kunstsammlungen in

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Chemnitz, Germany, exhibited about 100 Futurist and Constructivist works on paper from the museum.

'We are thrilled to be able to display a collection that is completely unknown in the West and that shows the work of artists to whom we have never been introduced,' the Chemnitz curator, Susanne Anna, wrote in an introduction to the catalogue. The Chemnitz show included some fine works that added substantially to what is known about the graphic works of Soviet artists from 1914 to 1931. But because it concentrated on graphics, it gave only a hint of the Nukus collection's depth and quality.

From the narrowly conceived Chemnitz show to the more ambitious French show is a major step. The final step, however, remains to be taken, and several diplomats who have recently served in Uzbekistan want to take it. They are hoping to persuade American museums to show a large portion of the Nukus collection in New York and other cities this year and in 1999.

'It still remains to introduce the collection in all its richness to the world art community in a major way,' said one of the diplomats, Khalid Malik, who has just completed a five-year term as the chief United Nations representative in Uzbekistan. 'We are hoping to make that happen. When it does, this collection is really going to go ballistic.'