A Report

“The Tretyakov Gallery”

## The introduction

The Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow is a major world-famous collection of Russian graphic arts. The quiet Lavrushinsky Pereulok, a by-street across the Moscow River from the Kremlin, with the familiar building of the Tretyakov Gallery behind a wrought-iron fence, is frequented by both Muscovites and visitors to the capital. The Tretyakov Gallery firmly imbeds itself in the Russian’s intellectual life from their very early teens. Here, exposed to canvases by Russia’s foremost painters, people first awakened to an appreciation of art, to its message and emotional impact. The Tretyakov Gallery has become what can be described as a “popular” museum, with long lines of people queuing to get in.russians are ardent devotees of art, and Russian museums attract the world’s largest crowds. The distinction of the Tretyakov Gallery is well known outside the Russia - foreign visitors from many countries of the world make it a point to include the Tretyakov Gallery into their Moscow schedule.

## The basic part

The Tretyakov Gallery is in many ways a unique museum. Its paintings reflect the varied life-styles and intellectual spectrum of the Russian people throughout the many centuries of their history.

The Gallery was founded by Pavel Tretyakov (1839-1889), a Russian merchant and industrialist. A patriot and patron of the arts, he conceived of Russia’s first museum of national Russian art back in the 1850’s. Tretyakov wrote in 1860: “Being a man sincerely and faithfully fond of the art of painting I have a lifelong wish to start a public and easily accessible treasury of fine arts, one that will be useful to many and enjoyable to all”. For more than thirty years Tretyakov persistently worked to make his ambition come true. His earliest acquisition of Russian paintings dates back to 1856, the year when the Gallery was formally founded, and included two paintings - a small socio-moralistic canvas in the style of P. Fedotov - *Temptation* by N. Shilder, and V. Khudyakov’s romanticized battle-scene *Clash with Finnish Contraband Smugglers*. Subsequently both paintings were recognized as the best accomplishments by the two mid-19th-century painters, who are hardly known today, but who in their own time, were the young collector’s peers and contemporaries. In 1892, when Pavel Tretyakov formally donated his collection to the city of Moscow, it included about two thousand paintings by all the noteworthy Russian artists of the 19th century and some of the 18th century. It was a genuine museum of national art, its best specimens reflecting in faithful detail both its past and its present.

The Museum was laid out in a gallery specifically constructed for the purpose - a U-like structure around the Tretyakov’s living quarters in Lavrushinsky Pereulok. Since the early 1870’s the museum, even then known as the Tretyakov Gallery, has been open to visitors, irrespective of their origin or social standing. With every passing decade the Gallery’s fame and popularity constantly grew. Until Tretyakov’s decision in 1892 to donate his gallery to the city of Moscow was enthusiastically welcomed by the Russian public. At the same time it was universally recognized that the decision had not come as any big surprise. Tretyakov, who remained a lifetime trustee of the Gallery, indefatigably sought new additions.

The Gallery continued to grow under Tretyakov’s successors. Between 1892 and 1917, when the October Revolution took place, the Gallery almost doubled its stock.

An important highlight in the pre-revolutionary history of the Gallery was the addition of new halls and the partial remodeling of the old ones. In 1902-04 the original halls built in Tretyakov’s time were complemented by his rebuilt living quarters, while the entire set of structures received a common facade in the Old Russian style which exists even now and was designed by the artist Victor Vasnetsov, a great friend and admirer of Tretyakov.

Following the October Revolution of 1917 the stock of the Gallery and its formal status was changed. On June 3, 1918, Lenin signed a “Decree of the Council of People’s Commissars to Nationalize the Tretyakov Gallery" making its national rather than municipal property. Under Lenin’s Decree the Gallery was to bear the name of Tretyakov, its founder.

The Gallery rapidly began to build up its stock. It was replenished by number of private collections and paintings from the deserted mansions and country estates. As a result of the centralization and restructuring of museum collections of the mid-20’s the Gallery came into the possession of many important works of Russian art from the reorganized small museums such as the Rumyantsev Museum, the Ostroukhov Museum of Icons and Painting, and the Tsvetkov Gallery. For example, A. Ivanov’s famous painting *The Appearance of Christ to the People* came from the Rumyantsev Museum, a first rate collection of old Russian icons came from the Ostroukhov Museum. A large collection of Russian drawings and watercolours came from the Tsvetkov Gallery. At the same time the Tretyakov Gallery parted with West-European painters’ works that had come to the Gallery from the collections of Tretyakov and Morozov: these paintings were made available to the specialized museums.

As a result between 1917 and the early 30’s the Tretyakov Gallery’s collection grew 4 to 5 times. 50 years later, by the late 1970’s it had tripled and amounted to 60 thousand exhibits. Now the collection reflects the history of ethnic Russian art in all its forms - painting, sculpture and drawing. This work is about the paintings section of the collection, which traditionally remains the most comprehensive and attractive.

Let’s start with a few samples of what can truly be regarded as a unique collection of 11th-17th century Russian painting. At present the collection includes over 4 thousand exhibits. It is the largest and best collection of Old Russian painting of all the museum collections. Some of the most illustrious masterpieces include the legendary *Our Lady of Vladimir*, brought to Russia from Byzantium early in the 12th century by Kiev princes. There is also the *Old Testament Trinity* by Andrei Rublev, an icon painting genius of the 15th century, and many other famous monuments of Old Russia, which embodied in peculiar medieval form the notions about the world, nature, good and evil, national heroism, human wisdom and motherly love.

The collection of Old Russian painting was started by Pavel Tretyakov himself, who owned sixty two icons of the 15th-17th centuries.

A no less significant portion of the Gallery’s collection is represented by a repository of paintings of the late 18th and early 19th century, during which period Russia’s secular art emerged and blossomed. The portraits of this period are well represented by the famous portraits - Nikitin, Antropov, Rokotov, Levitsky, Borovikovsky, Kiprensky, Tropinin, and Briullov. Brought to us across the years, are the living faces of people of that time, with their life-styles, moral values, ideals and hopes. At that period the portrait had become one of the leading forms in Russian art - a feature which was in full agreement with the humanitarian principles of Russian painters, whose always reflected their choice of man as the focus of their prime interest.

The Gallery also possesses an equally comprehensive collection of Russians landscapes of that period, more particularly paintings by landscape masters like Semyon Shchedrin, Matveyev, Alekseyev, Silvestr Shchedrin, and Lebedev. Being both Classicist and Romanticist, they were always guided by the typically Russian poetic lyricism in their interpretations of landscape imagery, where they painted the natural beauty of their native land - exemplified by Alekseyev’s town scenes, or beautiful Italian landscapes - a requirement of the time - by Silvestr Shchedrin.

The Gallery also has a collection of 18th and early 19th-century history painting executed in the classical tradition, the leading artistic trend of the time. The works of Anton Losenko, the representative of the 18th century classical tradition, which revolved around historical themes, exalt love for one’s motherland, heroism and self-sacrifice in the name of patriotism.

The Tretyakov Gallery brilliantly exhibits the creations of Alexander Ivanov. A few early canvases, a large number of sketches, and the pinnacle of the painter’s creativity - the enormous painting *The Appearance of Christ to the People* - make up the backbone of the artist’s Gallery collection, which embraces all facets, all hues of the creative heritage of the great master, who was able to enrich Russian painting with his incisive mentality and his noble creative spirit.

Another supreme painter of early 19th-century Russia, Karl Briullov, is represented in the Tretyakov Gallery by a large number of superlative portraits. They include *Self-portrait*, portraits of Strugovshchikov, and *The Amazon*, paintings that can unquestionably be considered as genuine masterpieces of the world’s art of portrait painting.

The Tretyakov Gallery has a fairly comprehensive and admirably executed collection of the democratic trend in Russian painting of the early 19th century represented predominantly by Vasily Tropinin, Alexei Venetsianov and Pavel Fedotov. Tropinin may have been one of the first Russian painters to depict the people of the so-called ‘third estate’ - peasants and artisans, invariably infusing their images with human dignity and beauty. Venetsianov’s paintings are tremendously attractive in their quiet poeticism. He was the first Russian artist who lovingly and competently portrayed the charm of Russian nature and the inherent beauty of the Russian peasant woman. Fedotov showing the life of merchants, government officials, impoverished gentry and the military uses his art to purify public morality and eliminate social injustice. The creative works by Venetsianov and Fedotov marked a decisive turn in Russian painting towards contemporary realism.

The Tretyakov Gallery’s collection of works from the second half of the 19th century is put mainly by Tretyakov himself. This collection includes all the fairly important masters of Russian art. However, Tretyakov himself emphasized in his appreciation of art the newly emerging realistic trend. It was on this trend that he counted for a hopeful future for the Russian painting school. The Gallery features a diverse collection of paintings by one of the founding fathers of Russian critical realism, Vasily Perov. An outstanding character painter and portraitist, he very faithfully depicted the humiliation of the Russian peasantry in the period following the reform of 1861, when the peasant was no longer formally a serf, but in fact did not have any land or means to buy it. The painter portrayed the horrifying poverty and oppression of the citizenry at the bottom of the social ladder. This trend was exemplified by such paintings as *Lying in State*, and *The Last Inn at the City’s Edge*. The Gallery features a well compiled collection of paintings by what were known as “peredvizhniki", a group of painters who arranged traveling exhibitions of their own and other’s works.

An association for mobile art exhibitions emerged in 1870 and for more than two and a half decades shaped the conceptuality of the entire Russian art. In the 1870’s and early 1880’s the traveling painters received ideological guidance from Ivan Kramskoy, a renowned portrait painter, who was Tretyakov’s adviser and one of the topmost authorities on selecting and buying paintings for the Gallery. Kramskoy’s best portraits, those of Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Nekrasov, Mikhail Saltykov-Schedrin and others were commissioned by Tretyakov.

The painting by Nikolai Gay - *Peter the Great Interrogating Prince Alexei Petrovich in Peterhof* - became an important landmark in the process of mastering the principles of realism and historical authenticity in Russian history-oriented painting.

The outstanding battle artist Vasily Vereshchagin depicted war as the “worst kind of atrocity", a source of barbarism, death and destruction (*Apotheosis of War*).

In the work of the traveling painters, portrait painting progressed toward a more decisive analysis of the model’s psychology, toward describing the many facets of his often controversial personality.

The second half of the 19th century was marked by considerable successes in landscape painting. The national motif became a dominant feature in the creativity of all landscape painters of the time, of whom the most outstanding were Savrasov, Vasilyev, Shishkin, Kuinji, Polenov, and Levitan, who not only committed themselves to depicting natural beauty, but also to showing nature as being an integral part of the life of the Russian people.

The most outstanding painters in late 19th-century Russia were Repin, Surikov, and Vasnetsov. Ilya Repin is considered a sage of the large “congregation" picture describing everyday life (*They Did Not Expect Him*) as well as an outstanding master of the psychological portrait. Vasily Surikov was a prominent painter of historic pictures - he interpreted Russian history as a sequence of events in which the Russian people played an important role. Victor Vasnetsov selected motifs from the treasure trove of national folklore - the characters from Russian folk tales, myths and legends (*Russian Legendary Heroes*, *Alyonushka*).

The next stage in the history of Russian art is the period of the late 19th and early 20th century (up to the year 1917) marked by the work of outstanding masters such as Serov, Vrubel, Korovin, Borisov-Musatov and many others, who, in their own specific way took over and developed the realistic tradition of Russian culture.

The Gallery has a rich collection of works by the “World of Art" artists - a large group formed in the late 1890’s and early 1900’s around the journal “World of Art" - Benois, Somov, Bakst, Grabar, Kustodiev, Malyavin. Exquisite canvases in the Gallery represent the work of young “new wave” painters of the late 1900’s - 1910’s: Kuznetsov, Konchalovsky, Mashkov, and Kuprin.

The most recent and largest section of the Tretyakov Gallery’s collection of paintings is Soviet artists: Petrov-Vodkin, Grekov, Nesterov, Gerasimov, Deineka, Pimenov. The Gallery has an excellent collection of the best paintings devoted to the heroic struggle of the Soviet people on the front lines and in the rear during the Great Patriotic War of 1941-45. These include *The Outskirts of Moscow. November, 1941* by Deineka, *A Letter from the Front* by Laktionov, and *The End* by Kukryniksy.

## The Conclusion

The time runs with a huge velocity. One hundred and fifty years passed over for the Tretyakov Gallery. It has absorbed the calm of 18th, the refinement of 19th, and the unrest of 20th century after this time. Nowadays the spirit of all these events gives us the Gallery. We are grown up and educated on this; it is our property and pride.

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