

Scattering, collecting, and scattering again

The invention and management of national heritage in the USSR

by **Irina Sandomirskaja**

Among the dramatis personae of European modernity, the collector strikes an eccentric figure representing, at one and the same time, both modernity and anti-modernity in their most characteristic aspects. As anti-modern, by gathering objects into his collection, he saves them from destruction (from industrialization, war, or revolution) or exploitation (in functions that are alien to the nature of the objects). Such was Balzac's Cousin Pons – an insignificant human being, a miser, and a poor relative in a rich and insensitive family, who struggled all his life and gathered a considerable amount of masterpieces, affording them a pure, disinterested love without ever considering their commercial value.

However, after Cousin Pons' death, his heirs immediately capitalized on his property. The objects once saved from scatter by the naïve eccentric were thus scattered again – this time, as advised by the sane and reasonable bourgeois common sense, and against considerably higher prices. And indeed, things do not have value as such but only acquire it in repeated acts of exchange.¹ Cousin Pons' cherished objects dispersed, again, all over the wide realm of the unrestricted circulation of commodities. With an increase in their market value, things themselves become irrelevant – what is significant is their value and the purpose they serve, or the idea they represent when gathered again. This is why the museum with its priceless treasures displayed so as to represent a certain principle or a national ideal is such an important invention of modernity. In Konstantin Vaginov's parodic novel *Garpagoniana* from 1933 (not published until 50 years later), a bunch of anti-social, if not criminal, collectors secretly operate in the shade of the socialist economy organizing their own little black market, collecting and exchanging absurdly useless, ephemeral items such as paired nails, cigarette butts, graveyard epitaphs, or dreams of virgin

maidens. Completely devoid of even a shadow of utility or meaning, these collectibles, passionately hunted and hidden from the world, represent, in effect, fully idealized and ideal objects of modern connoisseurship and collectorship; they change hands and thus gain in value – even though solely in the eyes of the mad collector who dreams of making a systematic collection of his favored non-things as complete as possible.²

IN THE CASE I am presenting here, it is practically impossible to determine whether the collector and connoisseur in question was, indeed, saving his objects from scattering and destruction – or contributing to their further enslavement by exploiting them in a capacity that was radically alien, if not inimical, to their nature. I am speaking about Igor Immanuilovich Grabar (1879–1960), an outstanding functionary in the Russian art and art history establishment; the founding father of Russian medieval art history; the discoverer and curator of Russian icon painting; a collector; a museum organizer; an internationally acknowledged expert in the attribution, restoration, and conservation of art; and a specialist in cultural diplomacy under Stalin. The Russian Orthodox icon was the chief object of his collectorial desires and connoisseurial interventions.

“ALMOST SINGLE-HANDEDLY, HE ACHIEVED THE TRANSFORMATION OF AN ANCIENT HOLY OBJECT INTO A MODERN AESTHETIC PHENOMENON.”

Almost single-handedly, he achieved the transformation of an ancient holy object into a modern aesthetic phenomenon, of a historical religious symbol into a representation of the Soviet aesthetics and proclaimed religious tolerance, of divine relics – into objects of useful value for the Bolsheviks, to be utilized as means of propaganda, instruments of cultural diplomacy, and marketable commodities. The contradiction between the conservative affects in collectorship and its quite revolutionary institutional practices is obvious in this case, and so is the conservative Grabar's quite futurist approach to manipulating



Expropriation of valuable objects from the church, probably 1922.

the past to produce a new collective memory for the new Soviet community of people.

The personal myth of Grabar as the founder of the Soviet art museum and a world authority in Russian art history was coined and promoted by Grabar himself in his prolific autobiographic, professional, and essayistic writing.³ In 1960, in his obituary, a colleague mentioned an “amazing and felicitous feature in Grabar’s creative personality [...] his personal interests invariably coinciding with the interests of the state.”⁴ His Soviet biographers praise him for his “true interest in the destinies of Russian art that found its genuine expression during the Soviet epoch” and “Grabar’s civic sentiments, his passionate love for Russia, for Russian art, his efforts to preserve for the sake of the people the greatest cultural achievements of its ancestors.”⁵ As an art-

ist, he was, and still is, valued for the solid quality of his post-impressionist manner of painting in his ideologically neutral production – still-lives and landscapes extolling the pleasures of Russian private life and the beauty of nature. In his autobiography, Grabar himself explained: “Indeed, I was destined to give exceptionally much time of my life to public activity, but this has also been my service (*sluzhenie*) for the sake of art, art, and art.”⁶

With his characteristically keen understanding of the “interests of the state”, he had been the first to offer his services to the Bolshevik regime in 1917 while the absolute majority of his colleagues refused to support it. As a result of the Sovnarkom decree on the registration and protection of monuments of culture and antiquity (October 1918), and amongst the rioting and pillaging that it had unleashed,⁷ Grabar was issuing passionate appeals



The church of the Savior on the Neredita, Novgorod; in the 1910s, after WWII, and today.

to collect, save, and protect “cultural values” – i.e., property from churches, monasteries, estates, and private collections alienated by the new regime.

ASSISTING THE BOLSHEVIKS' destruction of private collections and old museums and the subsequent establishment of new museums, both of which were under his personal control, Grabar was appealing to the new regime's ignorance and greed. The Bolsheviks were evaluating the looted valuables as scrap by weight, but Grabar convinced them to preserve and then to realize them as objects of “world cultural significance”. Assessing the results of the expropriations (by means of violence and intimidation), Grabar was satisfied with the fact that “during 1922–1923, museums were enriched with objects of applied and decorative art to an extent they had never been enriched during the decades before.”⁸

His strategies under the Bolshevik rule were a continuation of his projects from before the Great war, when he had served as a trustee of the Tretiakov gallery. After the publication of the six volumes of the *History of Russian Art* by 1915, which Grabar had edited and co-authored, after his widely advertised expeditions to the Russian North during the 1900s and 1910s, and after the first exhibition of Russian icons organized to celebrate the 300 years of the Romanov dynasty in 1913, no one could question his authority as a connoisseur and a historian. But they did question his ethics. In his memoir *Mezhdru dvukh revoliutsii* (first published in Leningrad in 1935), Andrei Bely, who had met Grabar in the early 1900s, described him as “a bureaucrat of culture” who had “allowed his ironic scepticism to putrefy an internal flight in himself, “a *miriskusnik* from head to heels”, “skeptical and condescending”, and “a learned satyr.”⁹ But equally important – and this is what relates this cynical game player to Balzac's innocent Cousin Pons – Bely acknowledged that Grabar was passionately devoted

“AS IN THE TIME OF REVOLUTIONARY EXPROPRIATIONS, GRABAR AGAIN APPEARS BOTH AS EXPERT AND AS INSTITUTIONAL DESIGNER.”

to the collection of antiquities: “He was collecting materials for his history of monuments, spending all his money for this deed of culture, rushing around from one godforsaken hole to another; he would emerge out of there and boast of his materials...”¹⁰

The aestheticized icons and churches were inherited and appropriated by the Soviet art history from the Silver Age already as desecralized images and as arbitrary symbols. When Grabar was saving icons from vandalism by claiming their museum value, he was certainly protecting them from physical demise. But in doing so, he also prepared them for further exploitation in Soviet atheist propaganda and cultural politics. Grabar's reputation as a connoisseur of European art, which he had gained during his several years of studies in Munich at the turn of the century, came in handy when later on the Bolsheviks conceived a plan for a cultural offensive against the West and attempted to trade Western art masterpieces and Russian icons in exchange for military materials, technology, and diplomatic recognition.¹¹

The 1921 Riga Treaty between Soviet Russia, Ukraine, and Poland opened up another major episode in the Soviet appropriation of Russian heritage and its symbols. As in the time of revolutionary expropriations, Grabar again appears both as expert and as institutional designer, this time in various projects of marketing culture – but also as a greedy collector fighting to protect his (or national) treasures against the encroachments of “the Poles,” while the Bolshevik negotiators were seeking to appease the former enemy by satisfying their art claims and rejecting territorial and financial claims. With that characteristic collectorial fixation on completeness, Grabar fought for the USSR to keep major collections untouched as treasuries of international cultural significance. This, however, did not prevent the Bolsheviks from selling the pearls of the Hermitage, the Diamond Fund, and many other unique collections to



Igor Grabar painting his "Self Portrait in a Fur Coat", from: Igor Emmanuilovich Grabar, *Pis'ma*. 1941–1960, Nauka, Moscow, 1983.

the West in exchange for industrial equipment in the late 1920s through the mid-1930s.

The travelling *Exhibition of Russian Art in America* in 1924 was curated by Grabar “offering a generous perspective on Russian aesthetic activity,”¹² mostly academic realist and Modernist art, partly brought from Russia and partly exporting from Malmö what remained of the Russian art exposition (also curated by Grabar) at the 1914 Baltic exhibition in that city. It opened in New York and then toured the major museums in the US and Canada until the end of 1925. The leading artists who still remained back in Russia, quite impoverished in the new economic reality, were promised a market full of rich American clients. As a diplomatic and commercial enterprise, the show failed completely. But as an early attempt of trading art for international acknowledgment, it was a pioneering enterprise. The art critic and collector Christian Brinton helped to set up the show in New York using his museum connections. He already had some experience arranging Russian events before and would continue collaborating with the Soviets in curating Socialist realist art shows until the middle of the 1930s.¹³

WHEN IN 1928 the Bolsheviks conceived a commercial initiative to sell Russian icons in the West, Grabar suggested a more sophisticated plan of first appealing to Western collectors and connoisseurs to promote this entirely new art object among museum directors, art history specialists, gallery experts, cultural celebrities, and politicians by way of taking “a number of measures to create the demand and a certain ‘fashion’.” This is how the famous international icon show, *Monuments of Ancient Russian Painting. Russian Icons of the Twelfth to Seventeenth Centuries* was conceived, organized by Narkomtorg and Gosantikvariat¹⁴ and assisted by the German Society for the Study of Eastern Europe. It started with an international tour in Berlin in 1929, went on to the Victoria and Albert Museum, and then to the Metropolitan Museum in New York. There was indeed an interest in icons in the West, and Grabar’s pre-revolutionary *Istoriia russkogo iskusstva* was the most authoritative source, as advertised by



Religious icons displayed as artworks, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, 1930.

Grabar himself in his numerous public lectures. During the months of preparation he spent in Germany, Grabar met with eminent museum experts as well as numerous gallerists, politicians, and academics. In the meantime, he gave well-attended public lectures and wrote for art magazines, inspected established museum collections to identify fakes (which he found in abundance), and offered fascinatingly bold attributions, not necessarily probable.

It was largely due to this effort, supported by complicated political games behind the scenes, that the Russian icon emerged internationally as a desirable collectible, an expensive market commodity, and a coveted possession among the world’s highest-ranking museums. Without this work of advertising, it would have had little legitimacy, coming as it did without provenance (apart from a stamp by the Tretyakov gallery), nor responding to generally accepted criteria of authenticity. At that time, a special secret committee for “desidentification” (*obezlichivanie*) was operating at the state treasury, Gokhran, a department of the People’s Commissariat for Finance, seeing to it that art objects would be cleansed of any signs of previous ownership. The exhibition was touring the world during the time of the Bolsheviks’ massive repressions against the church, of which the potential clients were quite aware. The show thus advertised the Soviet way of “protecting traditional values” in which the Soviet regime sought to appear as a much better custodian of the property of the church – and showing a greater concern for the spiritual and religious life of the Russian people – than the church itself.

Due to these connoisseurial efforts in propaganda, the Russian icon appeared in the West as a Soviet cultural trademark, the brainchild of the new Soviet approach to the past, a material outcome of positivist knowledge within the framework of communist ideology, and owing its international success to the care of Russian heritage by the Bolshevik state. Grabar’s exhibition showcased the Russian icon as a new face of Soviet Russia, a generous gift from the Soviet government to the art student and the connoisseur alike.

During and after the Second World War, when the Soviet

government started the assessment of the material losses caused by the war, the collectorial affect of “saving and protecting” now concerned old churches and palaces in occupied regions, destroyed in war, being reconstructed. In practice this meant that some needed to be rebuilt almost from scratch. This was not only a tribute of respect for lost treasures. It was also a retribution in the name of the Russian people who had been robbed of their heritage by the enemy and were now receiving it back from the hands of the generous victor. Categories like historical truth, originality, and authenticity had by that time already become quite arbitrary. What was at issue, however, was the USSR being compensated for the damage incurred. As early as 1942, Minister of Foreign Affairs Vyacheslav Molotov’s Narkomindel was already issuing diplomatic notes demanding the Nazis to be held responsible by international law for the destruction of the Soviet people’s property. A special emphasis was made on monuments and churches due to their unique character as world heritage.¹⁵ Books were being published and documentary films produced that demonstrated the staggering levels of destruction, with old buildings aflame and the Piranesian ruins of Leningrad, Kiev, Novgorod, Klin, and Yasnaya Polyana.¹⁶ They were used both as propaganda inside the country, fanning patriotic anger in Russian citizens, as well as abroad, incurring sympathy in cultural diplomacy and providing evidence for Soviet negotiation positions with regard to compensation. Additionally, the horrific pictures of destruction also served to justify the looting of German museums and collections by the Red Army.

As could be expected, now an old man, Grabar – the connoisseur and the collector – played a central role in these events. He was summoned as an expert to work on a committee to evaluate the destruction of cultural monuments in 1942. It was he who promoted the idea of avenging German destruction of cultural values in the Soviet Union by expropriating the property of German museums and art collectors, for instance, the Pergamon Altar. This is how the massive looting of German art by the Soviet military authorities began, with the relocation of innumerable monuments to secret storage sites in the USSR, mostly under the same pretext of “saving and protecting”, just as in the expropriation of Russia’s own patrimony some 25 years before. Grabar’s intimate knowledge of Western collections was useful in locating, mapping, and evaluating art objects to be treated by the so-called trophy brigades, i.e., groups of art experts and NKVD officers that were formed and instructed by Grabar himself or were under his guidance.¹⁷

EVEN THOUGH the issues of post-war reparations were officially and finally settled in 1990 (which made possible the reunification of Germany), the dramatic circumstances of the post-war relocation of art from Europe to Soviet secret storage, supported by cultural authorities like Igor Grabar, are still disputed and will probably remain highly sensitive ideologically, politically, and legally for a long time to come.¹⁸ The concept of Russian patrimony as it was invented by Grabar would play a role in the post-war division of Europe and then, long after his death, throughout the Cold War and after it up to the present moment in international

relations as the Putin administration uses the same language of patrimony for the justification of its territorial claims. But all of this, however, is already a different story. ✕

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- 4 Quoted from “Introduction,” in Igor’ Grabar’, *Pis’ma. 1941–1960* (Moscow: Nauka, 1983), 5.
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- 8 Grabar’, *Moia zhizn’*, 278.
- 9 Andrei Bely, *Mezhdru dvukh revoliutsii*. Vol. 3. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1990), 212.
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- 12 *The Russian Art Exhibition*. Foreword by Christian Brinton, Introduction and Catalogue by Igor Grabar (New York: Grand Central Palace, 1924), 3.
- 13 For a discussion of Brinton, see Mechella Yezernitskaya’s article in this special section.
- 14 Narkomtorg, the People’s Commissariat for Foreign Trade; Gosantikvariat, or Antikvariat, was an office within Gistorg arranging foreign sales of antiques and artworks.
- 15 Grabar, *Pis’ma 1941–1960*, 29–30, 31–32 and 228.
- 16 Igor Grabar (ed.), *Pamiatniki iskusstva, razrushennye nemetskimi zakhvatchikami v SSSR* (Moscow and Leningrad: Izdatel’stvo AN SSSR, 1948); a three-part documentary by S. Bubrik, *Razrusheniia proizvedenii iskusstva i pamiatnikov nastional’no i kul’tury, proizvedennye nemtsami na territorii SSSR* (1946).
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