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Russian art's Indian summer

Ending a long period of isolation, Russian artists re-enter the art market to hold their first privately organised exhibition which opens this week.

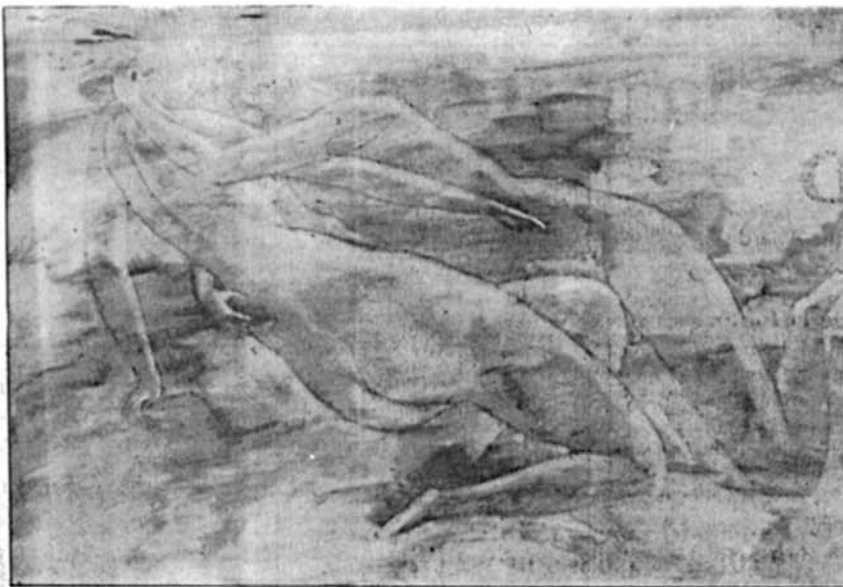
Madhusree Sinha Roy meets the artists and previews the show

ART

The "wall" went down with much fanfare, the "curtain" has lifted. But as anyone in Russia will tell you, it's still some way to the light at the end of the tunnel. It is a time to be free but also to reassess, almost rediscover one's identity. Such a quest brings a group of Russian artists to India for a first ever exhibition cum sale of their works. Searching for new images and ideas, these artists are united by a common interest in India and enthused by their Indophile friend, Vice President of the Indo-Russian Roerich Club, Vladimir Anisimov. Exhibiting at the Habart Gallery, after a premier at the Oberoi, they present a medley of styles, techniques and media. Compared to other socialist countries like Poland, Russia has always had a low profile in the art scene. The last 75 years saw a further lowering of creative heat, merging from the hangover of Stalin's 'socialist realism' — where portraits of party bosses had been levated to an art form — these modern Rip Van Winkles look out into a changed world. 75 years is long time to have been away, but art, says painter and art teacher, Konstantin Persedsky, "never tops or perishes". It lies imbedded within the race memory, active or dormant, but ever present to be called up at will. And, "we have taken up where

others had left off," he adds. Reflecting on their communist past, they speak eloquently of new found freedom — aesthetic, ideological and financial. But beyond the ominous shadow of Big Brother and The Party, they are now blinded by the glare of the free market. The heavy hand of the Party may have been restrictive but it had ensured bread, shelter and more to the assentors. In the new order, they hope, one will "rise or fall by talents alone." How far had it been possible to be true to one's art in Communist Russia? Anisimov, who is the spokesman for the team, says that anonymity was what this particular bunch sought, as they walked the slippery middle path between party dictates and artistic integrity. In the party's absence, the few private galleries like Alan or Mars have mushroomed in Moscow and some commercial houses have taken over its task of sponsorship. In fact, according to Anisimov, things are not as chaotic as one might believe and plans are already being drawn up to coordinate the marketing aspects.

When asked about their apprehensions about re-entering the international art world after such a long absence, they appear confident of holding their own. Wouldn't external influences confuse (if not confound) an already uncertain art scene? They emphatically declare that they are prompted by "Russian impulses" only. The plausibility of this assertion appears a little doubtful in the light of the present nature of the



Suspended erotica: Konstantin Persedsky's oil, entitled 'Bodies' (Right) Lobsters: a batik by Vladimir Anisimov

market. After all, who are the buyers? "Foreign commercial houses, individuals both within and outside the country. One paints keeping the foreign market in mind."

Considering Russia's inexperience in the art market, it would be so easy for capitalism's newest debutante to embrace the free market with a vengeance, and enact its own version of America's coca-cola culture. Although the artistic community is aware of such a threat, "it's too early to suggest effective remedies," they say.

Just back from a trip to Kulu, they speak of India as "a unique experience. India hits you at the gut level," says Persedsky. To the sombre Vitali Popov (painter and professor of art); India is a land of colour, of contrasts — in more ways than one. They all marvelled at the co-existence of the 13th and 20th centuries. "To a people who have lost their cultural roots, India's link with her past, the

continuity of her cultural heritage is indeed awe-inspiring," they aver.

Anisimov is no stranger to India and is currently on his 12th trip. The visit to Kulu has obviously led to speculation about a possible Roerich connection. But Anisimov asserts that his love for India owes nothing to Nicholas Roerich, who is President of the Indo-Russian Roerich Club, which incidentally is the new name of what used to be the Soviet Artists' Union. Nonetheless, Roerich is a man he admires and whose letter helped expedite matters for this trip. The Club has a number of plans for greater co-operation in the field of art and culture. Anisimov repeatedly mentions that this exhibition is not being held for profit. The entire profits of this show are to be deposited with the International Roerich Memorial Trust, to sponsor future events.

It is a wonderful selection too, that they have to offer. A number

of oils, a pretty collection of water-colours (some done during their trip to Kulu), bright tapestries in motifs reminiscent of Central Asia, ceramics (a small collection), and some incredible Batiks. It is amazing how this very South Asian art form has returned to India with such a face-lift. Anisimov's batiks have the effect of water colours. His *Impression of Delhi* retains the original batik effect even while experimenting with unusual colour schemes, material and imagery. *Lobsters* and *Winters in Georgia*, are two eye-openers in terms of technique. Persedsky's oils are instantly recognisable by his erotic treatment of the human form which appears suspended in its animation. Vitali Popov's *vas* colours have the flavour of another era, reminiscent of Turgenev's Russia. The other remarkable pieces are Tsiganov's *Birches* and Victor Lissinov's bold and exotic oil paintings. Lissinov is the one who got away. He lives in America and whose rags to riches story, these artists are most fond of narrating. In short, it has been a well deserved Indian summer.

