Dmitry Sarabyanov, Scholar and Teacher

Natalia Avtonomova
Director, Department of Private Collections, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow
natalia.avtonomova@arts-museum.ru

Dmitry Vladimirovich Sarabyanov, member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Doctor of Art History, celebrated scholar and theoretician, outstanding specialist in the history of the Russian avant-garde, and one of its primary champions, is responsible for the establishment of an entire school of art historians and researchers. His pupils are now the authors of numerous publications on twentieth-century art and include museum curators working with material objects as well as academics.

Whenever I think back to my student years, I remember the lessons which I took with Dmitry Vladimirovich in museums and other depositories, specifically in the Tretyakov Gallery. He was able to summon our attention from youthful distractions to the original works of art and to concentrate on stylistic analysis, endeavoring to teach us how to scrutinize a painting, while relating it to the museum environment. This kind of hands-on experience was especially important to Dmitry Vladimirovich because he believed that only such an integral assessment of the object would allow him to penetrate to the essence of the creative process, to the innermost depths of the artistic entity. In other words, the true, analytical “apparatus” of the researcher was to be distinguished by accuracy, precision, and clarity, and I can attest that these qualities accompanied Dmitry Vladimirovich’s own enquiries, especially into the art of the avant-garde which, as a matter of fact, is extremely difficult to describe and assess. Indeed, such art tends to be simple and easily accessible to both the professional and the layman in the good sense of the word and rarely has a need of pedantic, “pseudo-scientific” analyses. Dmitry Vladimirovich was drawn to the object itself, it excited his imagination, and his observations and deductions were the fruit of his spontaneous impressions of the painting, something which he managed to preserve until being able to give it verbal form. For him,

* The original, Russian text of this memoir was first published in Iskusstvoznanie, Moscow, 2014, No. 1-2, pp. 608-15.
the stylistic analysis of a work of art was never a mere inventory, a clinical description or, conversely, some kind of phrase-mongering for outer effect, but rather the fertile combination of rigorous scientific observation with spontaneous, impartial impression.

The books and articles by Dmitry Vladimirovich are full of vivid and graphic aphorisms bringing his deeply poetical personality into relief. We all understand that this is a rare capacity and a special gift, i.e. being able to exercise vision, to fathom, and to interpret the substance of the work of art, but Dmitry Vladimirovich possessed such poetry—and he was also very fond of music which helped him sense the spiritual plane, enter a state of contemplation, and relish that condition.

At the same time, Dmitry Vladimirovich based his observations about the history of art and culture in general on a profound knoweldge and erudition and on a careful and systematic investigative procedure, avoiding all reticence, vagueness, and “wishy-washiness.” He tried to keep an open mind, to juxtapose parallel elements, and to base his conclusions on infallible argumentation and persuasive testimony, a method which he tried to instill in his pupils, too.

Dmitry Vladimirovich devoted much time and energy to establishing the scholarly series of publications called Masters of our time which encompassed such important twentieth-century artists as Boris Kustodiev, Pavel Kuznetsov, and Ilya Mashkov, and one of his last books, co-authored with Yuliya Didenko, was a monograph on Robert Falk. Characteristically, 90% of the contents in these extra-large volumes constitute catalogues raisonnés, i.e. very detailed descriptions of relevant works in both public and private collections. These fundamental publications also contain numerous, well documented sections treating of various aspects of this or that artist’s life and work and are primary reference tools for museum curators, art historians, attributors, and collectors.

Some of the books grew out of art historical dissertations which students had completed at Moscow State University, where Dmitry Vadimirovich taught for many years. For example, the Catalog of paintings by Pavel Kuznetsov started off as Liubov Budkova’s dissertation. In the 1960s, her subject—cataloguing the works of a major representative of the Symbolist movement and supporter of the Jack of Diamonds group—was, so to speak, uncharacteristic, was certainly not part of the “canon,” and could scarcely have been broached without the initiative of her supervisor, i.e. Dmitry Vladimirovich. Indeed, this was a special role which he filled with aplomb—directing and stimulating the young researcher to look at unfamiliar material and, most importantly, to stimulate the desire to assemble and study each and every fragment of information and to work