In Memory of Dmitry Sarabyanov

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Dmitry Vladimirovich Sarabyanov played a very important role in my life. Even if we did not see each other all that often, our affection was mutual, and each time we met we would make a special toast “to us.” This “to us” denoted not only a close and long standing friendship, but also a special delight in each other’s company.

I well remember when, back in the early 1960s, the students of our class, including me, saw Sarabyanov for the first time. We knew that he would be teaching us the history of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Russian art in the wake of Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov’s lectures on the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but none of us had ever set eyes on him. He did not come to the University (Moscow State University) very often. He tended to give his courses and deliver lectures in the Tretyakov Gallery, in front of the pictures themselves—and that is where our first lesson took place. No prejudices, no formalities: from the start, he began to tell us about Russian art of that special period—which we all liked, but which, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, was not well represented in the Tretyakov: just one work each by Viktor Borisov-Musatov, Alexandre Benois, and Evgeny Lancere. Even Mikhail Vrubel and Valentin Serov were served by a mere smattering of works, even if, in comparison to previous years, their sections were new and regarded as fairly “comprehensive.”

For many, works by the Blue Rose and World of Art groups were eye-openers, even for me who had been nurtured on the Symbolist journals Mir iskusstva [World of Art], Zolotoe runo [Golden Fleece], and Apollon [Apollo] which stood on our bookshelves at home, on the paintings of the early Petr Konchalovsky hanging on our walls, and on the reproductions of Konstantin Somov’s pictures, with which my grand-father, Fedia, used to entertain me as a child. But I was truly amazed when, for the first time, I saw the art of that period in the Tretyakov Gallery, able to fully appreciate its extraordinary breadth, rich colors, subtle diversity, and unbridled boldness—which happened thanks to Dmitry
Vladimirovich. After a few rather tedious lessons in the main halls of the gallery, he took us into the store-rooms where paintings by Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich, and Nikolai Suetin, reliefs by Vladimir Tatlin, not to mention dozens of works by the early Natalia Goncharova, Pavel Kuznetsov, Mikhail Larionov, Martiros Saryan, and others were hanging or standing or were simply piled up one upon the other. We were all obliged to Dmitry Vladimirovich for this discovery of a vast world which, in those years, was still hidden from the public eye and only just coming to light, thanks to that moment in the evolution of Soviet society which tends to be defined as a cultural “thaw.”

With a rare selflessness and a constant, almost childish, pleasure—which, not without a certain fear and misgiving (after all this was still a kind of “forbidden fruit”), we all shared, Dmitry Vladimirovich would separate one picture from another, permitting us to clamber between pictures by Kandinsky, Aristarkh Lentulov, or Ilya Mashkov piled up higgley-piggledy on the wooden floors of the store-rooms. Here was a real feast of colors, a wave of incredibly variegated images and forms which simply immersed us—and so fully that, once out of the flood, we would forever remain enchanted by that extraordinary art and by the remarkable man who had bestowed this gift upon us. Ours was a genuine love and an unfailing gratitude.

Of course, our happiness and good fortune lay in the fact that we belonged to the generation of the 1960s which was well aware of modern art. True, our fathers and grand-fathers had also been acquainted with the subject, but during our childhood, it had been forbidden by illiterate, arrogant, self-assured, malicious, and all-powerful bureaucrats. For Dmitry Vladimirovich, who since his early childhood appreciated early twentieth-century Russian art, an organic part of his domestic ambience, this was a kind of second discovery, and it is precisely upon this process of continual rediscovery that he based his later essays and books on Robert Falk, Liubov Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, and Vladimir Tatlin.

For my course assignment, I chose the “Early Work of Martiros Saryan” and, so as to research the topic and write about it, I received permission to work in the store-rooms—alone. I shall never forget those precious hours. At that time, the store-rooms were in the enormous attics of the Tretyakov Gallery and in order to enter one had to climb a step-ladder. Once I was up there, the museum attendants shut the trap-door behind me, leaving me, confronted by these extraordinary treasures, completely to my own devices. For hours at a time, I was able to record my descriptions of Saryan’s temperas of Constantinople and Egypt, almost sensing the heat of the Mediterranean sun on my skin. Wide-eyed, I was able to wander around the works by Kandinsky, Mashkov,