If, according to Sergei Makovskii, “graphics is a gift of the fairies,”¹ Imperial Russia on the eve of World War I was most fortunate. The Petersburg school of graphics was, indeed, dazzling in its refined taste and elegance. The names of Bakst, Benois, Bilibin, Dobuzhinskii, Lancéray and Somov remain to this day symbols of the graphic excellence of the World of Art. Who can match Benois’s illustrations for Mednyi vsadnik? Who can equal Somov’s exquisite erotic fantasies for Das Lesebuch der Marquise? Who can surpass Bilibin’s magic imagery for Russian fairy tales? Allegiance to the text, profound understanding of the period involved, and uncommon artistic talent were the hallmark of Petersburg graphic artists. The technical superiority of such prestigious publishers as Golike and Vil’borg, the Department of the Preparation of State Papers, or the Kadushin Printing Co. guaranteed the most exacting standards of craftsmanship. Paper, type, layout, and the felicitous blend of pictorial and textual elements turned the book into a combination of visual delight and intellectual stimulation. A fine morocco binding by Shnell completed an artifact that was as delicately balanced as a Diagilev ballet.

Petersburg and Moscow had long been rivals, and rivals they were once again in the field of graphics. If Petersburg had often meant aristocratic retrospectivism and “a leisurely stroll through the past,” Moscow displayed a far more boisterous temperament, greatly inclined to shocking the established canons of taste. “Épater le bourgeois” must have been a keen delight for Goncharova, Rozanova, Larionov, and Malevich, and one can well imagine the raised eyebrows which greeted the illustrations for Miskontsa, Igra v adu, and Vozropshchem.² Retrospectivism and futurism clashed head on. The rivalry has now long receded into history but the two schools continue to vie for the attention of collectors.

World War I and the ensuing revolutionary turmoil profoundly disturbed the world of the Russian graphic arts. One by one artists fled Petersburg and Moscow to seek shelter abroad. Berlin, Paris, and even distant New York became the home of leading masters of Russian painting and graphic art. By 1927 some of the greatest names of Russian art had either left the Soviet Union or

¹ S. Makovskii and N. Radlov, Sovremennaya russkaya grafika (Petrograd: 1917), p. XIII.
² A. Kruchenykh and V. Khlebnikov, Mirskontsa (Moscow: 1912); Igra v adu (Moscow: 1912 and 1913); Vozropshchem (St. Petersburg: 1913).
chosen not to return there. Goncharova, Larionov, Somov, Bilibin, Ekster, Korovin, Annenkov, and Benois were in Paris, Sudeikin in New York, and Dobuzhinskii in Lithuania.

If Paris attracted many leading Russians, so did Berlin in the early twenties. Intellectual life in Berlin was most lively, and the Russian colony in 1922 numbered amongst its intellectual and artistic élite A. Arnshtam, R. Gul’, A. Tolstoi, I. Erenburg, P. Chelishchev, V. Parnakh, K. Boguslavskiaia, I. Puni, L. Lisitskii, and G. Lukomskii.

Among those who settled in Berlin at the end of 1921 was Vasilii Nikolae-vich Masiutin (1884-1959), a young Moscow graphic artist whose name, now known only to specialists, has been the victim of time, neglect, and the incalculable ravages of World War II. Born in Riga of German and Russian extraction, Masiutin was destined for the career of arms, but left the military in 1907 to enter in 1908 the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture from which he graduated in 1914. World War I interrupted his career in art, and the revolutionary upheaval led him first to Riga in 1920 and finally to Berlin in 1921. Although Masiutin was a versatile artist, able to try his hand at watercolor, sculpture, technical treatises and fiction, he is best remembered as a master engraver and illustrator whose contribution to Russo-German artistic life is significant.

The presence of large numbers of Russian émigrés in Germany in the early twenties boosted Russian cultural life to a very considerable degree. Numerous publishing companies, some of them first-rate, like “Gelikon,” “Petropolis,” and “Neva” served the cultural needs of an educated class which enjoyed fine books and relished the prospect of spending an evening in Berlin at “Der blaue Vogel” or at the “Russian Romantic Theater.” Masiutin found therefore a sophisticated audience, affluent enough to afford books of distinction at a reasonable price. No sooner had he arrived in Berlin than a steady stream of illustrations for Russian works in the original or in German translation established him as a leading illustrator. Whereas his previous work in Moscow, both pre-war and post-war, had been done in miniscule editions, barely sufficient for a mere handful of discerning collectors, his activity in Germany placed him in the forefront of Russian illustrators and, paradoxically enough, insured that his name would remain unknown for decades to Soviet citizens.

His illustrations for Gogol’s Portret had appeared in 1920, and 1921


4. Most of Masiutin’s early work, mainly etchings, was devoted to a pictorial rendition of the problem of evil and appeared in limited editions ranging from ten to thirty copies.