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HIDDEN COLLECTION

The Merriman Collection of Russian Realism

By MATTHIAS ANDERSON



Every collecting journey is unique, and that of Larry and Pat Merriman is no exception. Like so many before them, they focused on art when they needed to decorate a new home — in this case a condominium apartment near Sarasota, Florida, they acquired in 2001. The Merrimans already had a variety of artworks in their primary home in Canton, Ohio, where Larry owns a firm specializing in information management, but they were determined to find new ones for their Florida residence.

At first the Merrimans had a vague idea to seek Impressionist pictures like those they admired in museums, so they explored a few commercial galleries to get their feet wet. Visit after visit, they felt both unwelcome and uninformed, and were growing discouraged when they stopped by Wallace Fine Art on Longboat Key near their Florida home. Dealer Peter Wallace welcomed the Merrimans, who did not particularly like the art he was showing that day, but enjoyed his openness and now consider him a personal friend.

Soon thereafter, Wallace borrowed a group of Moscow School realist paintings from Lazare Gallery in Charles City, Virginia. These had been purchased in Russia from artists and agents by Lazare's John, Kathy, and Jonathan Wurdeman, who have since become the Merrimans' primary source, along with Peter Wallace. The Wurdemans, say Larry and Pat, are highly effective intermediaries because they speak Russian, know the artists well, and understand how to export artworks from Russia, which monitors this trade closely.

A NEW WORLD OF FAVORITES AND FRIENDSHIPS

The Merrimans have educated themselves by reading as much as possible on 20th-century Russia, and will only buy a picture if both of them love it. Most of the works on their increasingly crowded

VIKTOR GRIGOREVICH TSYPLAKOV (1915-1986)

THE MINER

1959, OIL ON CANVAS ON PANEL, 23 ⁵/₈ X 19 ⁵/₈ IN.





VYACHESLAV ZABELIN (1935-2001)
GATES OF THE OLD PARK
1994, OIL ON CANVAS, 21 1/2 X 31 3/4 IN.



VIKTOR GRIGOREVICH TSYPLAKOV (1915-1986)
THE ARTIST'S SON
1946, OIL ON PANEL, 11 X 9 IN.

NIKOLAI DUBOVIK (B. 1960)
CUPOLAS BY THE RIVER
2003, OIL ON CANVAS, 35 x 24 IN.



YURI KUGACH (B. 1917)
OVERCAST DAY
1970, OIL ON PANEL, 21 1/4 x 27 1/4 IN.





PAVEL SUDAKOV (b. 1914)

A COSSACK SOLDIER

1949, OIL ON CANVAS, 33 ⁷/₈ X 25 ¹/₄ IN.

Moscow to greet them. Three years later, the Merrimans visited Moscow with John Wurdeman, who brought them into studios normally invisible to even the most privileged cultural tourists. A special treat was the afternoon they spent in the Surikov Institute with Jonathan Wurdeman, that school's only American-born graduate.

This is an especially exciting season for the Merrimans because five of their pictures are hanging at The American University Museum in Washington, DC, as part of the Kugach exhibition described on page 24. They are particularly looking forward to seeing their friend Mikhail Kugach again at the opening celebration in January.

In general, the Merrimans have found Russian artists passionate about their art and exceedingly hospitable, offering lavish dinners in their homes with many toasts of vodka to wash it all down. They have also been moved by the enthusiasm all Russians seem to feel for the arts, especially the museums, where long, slow lines to the admissions desk are common even on a regular day. Larry observes that such determination is rarely exhibited by museum visitors in the U.S., or perhaps only for "blockbuster" shows on view for a limited time.

One intriguing aspect of the Merrimans' collecting journey has been hearing the reactions of friends and family members to a body of work unfamiliar to most Americans: A few dislike the very idea of Russia, but most enjoy the beauty even when they do not understand the contexts in which the art has been made. That lack of understanding, the Merrimans believe, is where an exciting challenge now exists for collectors, dealers, and scholars: To spread the word about the fascinating legacy of Russian realist painting, and thus to help sustain those still making it today. ■

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walls were painted by graduates of Moscow's Surikov Institute (see page 24); Larry prefers landscapes by such masters as Nikita Fedosov and Vyacheslav Zabelin, while Pat leans toward images of people, especially children. Her favorite works are illustrated here: Viktor G. Tsyplakov's *The Miner* and an unfinished portrait of his young son. The Merrimans' holdings date from the early 1900s right up to 2008, and they have paid anywhere from \$1,700 to \$110,000 per work.

A special joy in the Merrimans' collecting journey has been meeting the artists themselves. They have entertained several in their home, and have made two trips to Russia. In 2004, they arrived in St. Petersburg on a cruise ship and were touched to learn that several artists had journeyed northwest from

VLADIMIR YAKOVLEVICH SHCHERBAN (1919-2005)

A WET DAY

1971, OIL ON PANEL, 13 ³/₄ X 19 ³/₄ IN.

