

# DOING IT WITH DEINEKA

*MacDOUGALLS GO HORS-PISTE TO KICKSTART RUSSIAN AUCTION MARKET*

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**REPORT BY SIMON HEWITT**

**AN UNASSUMING sale of Soviet paintings may have shattered the status quo that has prevailed on London's Russian Art market for the last decade.**

MacDougall's 175-lot sale on October 12, officially styled *Soviet & Post-Soviet Art*, brought £3.9 million – undermining perceived wisdom that London's Russian auction market is dependent on all four firms active in the field grouping their sales together in twice-yearly Russian Weeks.

During the last Russian Week in June, MacDougall's sale generated 30% less: just £2.7m, with only 43% of lots sold (compared to 54% this time out).

This was, in fact, MacDougall's second out-of-season sale, after one devoted to Russian Porcelain last March. But that yielded a low-key £530,000 and – as a single-owner collection – looked more like a vendor in a hurry than a change in auction-house strategy.

Although MacDougall's will be selling as usual during the next Russian Auction Week (November 30-December 2), a change in strategy is clearly what we are now witnessing. Further 'interim' sales are bound to follow. It will be interesting to see how (or if) the competition reacts.



The mood was already upbeat at the pre-sale reception, graced by Russian Ambassador Alexander Yakovenko. He scarcely has time to do the rounds of all four auction-houses during Russian Week, but here – away from the need to smoothtalk his boss's Syrian adventure – he lingered happily, chatting to the media about the benefits of clean air, high-ceilinged rooms, hour-long daily walks and the vagaries of reconstruction in post-Soviet Moscow.

It might be an exaggeration to say that His Affable Excellency sprinkled stardust on saleroom proceedings, but his visit certainly did MacDougall's no harm.

Next day celebrity hammerman Charles Ross, with his microphone cranked up full-blast, was at his eardrum-battering best. I've heard of megaphone diplomacy, but this is the first time I've been subjected to heavy-metal auctioneering.



Charlie had good reason to cacophonate when lot 26 – a full frontal nude – sold in the room for £2.14m. Concealing her left bosom and *absolument rien d'autre*, she exuded similar soft-porn appeal to the Serebriakova *Sleeping Girl* that led Russian Week in June with £3.85m at Sotheby's.



Despite being hastily daubed, and in simplistically flattened perspective, *Behind The Curtain* was confidently ascribed by MacDougall's to Alexander Deneika on the basis of the 'expert' opinion of Tretyakov curator Tatiana Zelyukina (a specialist in the work of Deneika's contemporary Alexander Drevin), and a red-lettered inscription near the bottom-right of the canvas purportedly reading *Deneika to F. Bogorodsky*.

That was guesswork: the inscription says no such thing. *Deineka* is cut off at the *k*, and *Bogorodsky* is cut off at the *d*.

The inscription is followed by 1933, which is missing the subsequent *z*. (for *zod*, i.e. year) which *Deineka* routinely added when dating his works, as per Russian linguistic practice.



Perhaps the missing lettering was on paintwork that has unfortunately flaked off. But other factors may be relevant.

*Deineka* hardly ever dated his paintings with four digits – routinely using, say, 32 *z*. or 33 *z*. rather than 1932 *z*. or 1933 *z*. He usually, though not always, added the initial *A.* before writing his surname. And he often did not sign his paintings at all – so it is mystifying why he should sign one that, if brought to light, could have had catastrophic implications for his reputation in the prurient Stalinist '30s, especially if he were giving it to a friend as a (very) private gift.

None of which proves that the work is *not* by *Deineka*, of course. Neither does the fact that it looks about as much like a *Deineka* as a *Playboy* centrefold. What matters is that MacDougall's managed to convince the buyer that paying £1.8m for it (plus £348,500 commission) was a sound investment.

It is quite an achievement when the worst work in an auction makes the highest price.

Given that the painting came with a £2-3m estimate, its catalogue entry was bemusingly brief, consisting mostly of waffle about *Deneika*'s 'images full of optimism' and role as a 'tireless proselytiser of his socialist homeland' (both assertions being open to debate).

There was no attempt to explain why he should have painted something so stylistically atypical – a matey bet after a night on the vodka, perhaps ? – and produce a work that, without his signature, would be worth about 25p.

It is sad to see the name of one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's greatest artists associated with such mediocrity.

All the catalogue had to say about Fyodor Bogorodsky, meanwhile, was that he was a 'fellow artist' (one who proved quite a time-server, going on to head the Moscow Artists' Union). A photo of Bogorodsky with the picture would have been nice or, failing that, one of Bogorodsky with Deneika.

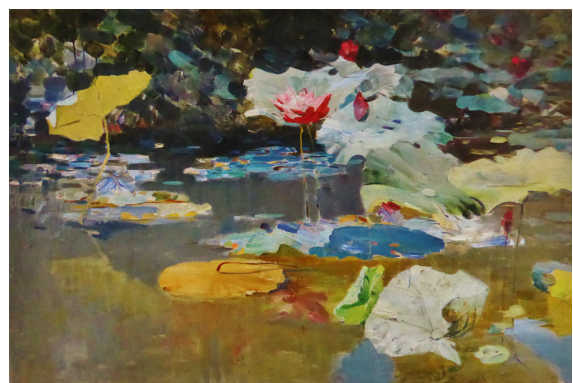


Like this one, showing them together (Bogorodsky in the beret) on a boat in Sevastopol in 1934 – reproduced in Vladimir Sysoyev's seminal 624-page, two-volume Deneika monograph published in Moscow in 1989 (its hundreds of Deneikas do not include *Behind The Curtain*).

MacDougall's sale featured 85 lots of Soviet Art in all, of which 38 sold – essentially to Russian buyers, reported Catherine MacDougall. 'The Soviet-era segment of the Russian art market is the new trend!' she concluded after the sale.

That judgment may be premature, but MacDougall's could be on to something. Until now, mainstream Soviet painting – broadly equating to Socialist Realism, though extending into the 'Soviet Impressionism' of the 1950s and 'Severe Style' of the 1960s – has looked a poor relation when sandwiched in auction catalogues between the Avant-Garde and the Non-Conformists. Parading it centre-stage grants it fresh coherence and respectability, underlining its nostalgic *motherland* appeal to Russians who cannot afford an Ayvazovsky or a Shishkin.

MacDougall's not surprisingly took the chance to re-offer (usually unsuccessfully) some works they had failed to sell in earlier auctions. But the majority came fresh to the market, which obviously enhanced their appeal. According to Catherine MacDougall, the United States was the chief source of supply – although plenty also came from western Europe, and the afternoon's second-highest seller was consigned from Italy: Konstantin Maximov's *Lotuses* (1956), painted in China, whither he had been fraternally dispatched to teach oil-painting. It sold on the phone for a double-estimate £251,000.



Of nine works by Nikolai Terpsikhov, all acquired from the artist's daughter and consigned from the USA, seven sold – led by his 1947 *Letter from the Front* at £111,400. All



five Viktor Popkovs found buyers, headed by his *Ailing Artist* (1972) at £39,000. So did the sale's three modest Plastovs. An Alexei Gritsay landscape – one of the last works he painted before his death in 1998 at the age of 84 – sold for a handsome £17,550, twice what had been expected.

There were solid prices for three big names of Soviet art: £87,300 for Nissky's undated *Sailboat – Evening*; £83,000 for a 1974 Pimenov poster design; and £99,800 for a 1963 Labas *Girl in the Balcony*, a stilted effort from this once-great artist's declining years.

But only one of seven landscapes by Yuri Kugach found a buyer. Two messy late works by Vasily Nechitailo went unsold, as did Nikolai Belyayev's bugle-tooting 1949 view of happy *Pioneers* (est. €20,000-30,000) and Yuri Komendant's *Khrushchov Visiting Miners in Donetsk* (est. €25,000-30,000) – even though it had been acquired by the consignor in Donetsk straight from the artist. Khrushchov's decision to transfer Crimea from Russia to Ukraine does not weigh happily among Russian patriots.

Two mildly erotic works by Grigory Chainikov, dated 1999 and 2007 and ambitiously touted at around £15,000 apiece, also failed to sell. They epitomized neo-Academic art at its banal worst.

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The sale featured three other sections, beginning with **Posters**. There were some striking images but estimates were high and the ensemble fared poorly. Just 7 from 17 sold, for a total £42,000 – led by a Stenberg brothers' poster for Protazanov's 1926 silent comedy *The Three Million Trial* (released in the U.S. as *The Three Thieves*) at £10,125.

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Next up were 37 lots of **Contemporary Art**, which yielded £364,000 and were 68% sold – a tidy improvement on MacDougall's June sale, whose 31 lots brought £202,500 with 55% finding takers (the last Russian Week saw just 74 contemporary works offered by the four auction houses combined). Provenance was the key: all the contemporary lots at MacDougall's October sale came from two private collections.



The first, amassed by a 'French diplomat of Russian extraction,' concentrated on works from the 1960s and '70s, and brought £162,000. Leading the way was a 1976 Weisberg *Reclining Nude* at £46,800. An outstanding 1978 work by Piotr Belyonok (shown left) sold over top-estimate for £7150.

The second ensemble brought £202,000 and was consigned by a 'Belgian collector' – identified, by primary sources, as the flamboyant cigar-chomping tycoon Eric Degove. The works were mostly produced in the early 1990s and, I am similarly informed, acquired for a song from the artists themselves.

Top price of £56,200 went Valery Koshlyakov's 1992 view of Moscow's *Hotel Moskva* (since completely rebuilt). No fewer than five works by Natalia Nesterova (recent works by whom are on show at Moscow's Z & L gallery until October 31) were offered: four sold, with her 1993 *Picnic in the Jardin du Luxembourg* taking £22,100.

But the most noteworthy price was the £21,400 paid for Tatiana Nazarenko's 1993 *Children in the Snow* – against an estimate of just £2500-3000 (see right).



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The sale's final section, devoted to a collection of Soviet Porcelain from the Lomonosov factory in St Petersburg, ran to 32 lots and was 72% sold, bringing £111,000.



Top lot was a Natalia Danko group of three Bolsheviks *Ready for Defence* (c.1930) at £31,200. That price was well clear of the £24,700 for an Imperial Porcelain *Peasant Girl* that led MacDougall's porcelain in June – and higher than any item at their specialist porcelain sale last March.

MacDougall's October porcelain highlight, however – and perhaps the finest work of art in the entire sale – was Irina Nikonova's *Basketball Player* from the early 1960s: one of the most graceful sporting figurines ever conceived. She fetched £7,800.

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Speaking after the auction, Marina Sitnina – head of the Gazprom art collection – heralded results as a 'turning-point' in the rollercoaster fortunes of the Russian auction market – which hit rock-bottom last June, when sales totalled £21.1m (down 48% on the previous November) and only one lot from 888 cleared £1m.

Things needed shaking up. MacDougall's have delivered.

