The New Art Czar

Flush with cash, Moscow and Saint Petersburg's elite are making an all-out assault to reclaim their nation's cultural treasures. Christie's Alexis de Tiesenhausen is helping lead the charge.

BY WILL BENNETT

During a whirlwind trip to Moscow this past November, Christie's head of Russian art, Alexis de Tiesenhausen, met with a client at one of the growing number of plush restaurants catering to the city's newly rich. As they ate caviar and drank vodka, the businessman revealed to Tiesenhausen his plans to acquire a huge art collection.

It is a measure of how far and how fast the market is moving that when the two men first met in London a year earlier, the Russian was a complete novice in the art world. "He came to us out of the blue," Tiesenhausen says.

This time the wealthy Muscovite—one of 20 clients Tiesenhausen visited in advance of Christie's latest Russian art sale in London—announced he had $1 million to spend at the auction and was targeting some two dozen paintings. In the end competition was so fierce, he had to content himself with using about half his budget on just eight pictures.

He'll no doubt be bidding again in April, at the next round of auctions in New York, along with the other Moscow and Saint Petersburg collectors who are fueling the extraordinary...
run-up in prices for Russian art. Christie’s November sale made $38 million, and Russian buyers claimed seven of the ten most expensive works. Among their trophies were a massive pair of gilded imperial vases decorated with Italianate landscapes, which went for $2.8 million, and a Cubist-inflected portrait by Robert

Fabelgä workshops, and ornate imperial silver and porcelain. The top lot, an Expressionistic still life by the avant-garde painter Ilya Ivanovich Mashkov, fetched an astonishing $3.7 million—making it the priciest painting ever sold at a Russian art auction. A decade ago that sum might have been the auction house’s total annual sales in the category.

For Tiesenhagen, 44, the boom has meant an opportunity to reconnect with his roots. His ancestors were Teutonic knights who moved to the Baltics and assimilated into the aristocracy of imperial Russia. But his parents’ families fled shortly after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and joined the White Russian émigré community in Paris.

Although Russian was his first language, Tiesenhagen was eager to be as French as all his friends during his school years. When he arrived in London in 1984, chance led him to a job in Christie’s Russian department. “Everything was totally different then,” he says. “The London sales were very small, and the Geneva auctions were the bread and butter of the department. In the eighties, speaking Russian was an asset, but it wasn’t really important.”

Two decades later Tiesenhagen uses Russian, which he speaks with a distinctive French accent, every day. He spends half his time away from Christie’s London headquarters, taking more than 80 flights a year to visit clients and search for works to feed the voracious market. Russia’s strict export laws prohibit artworks from leaving the country except on loan, meaning

The Russian Revolution

SAINT ISAAC’S ON A FROSTY DAY
Ivan Konstantinovich Alavozovskii
SOLD $2.1 million, Christie’s London, November 2004
DETAILS The rarity and beauty of this Saint-Petersburg winter scene by the country’s most beloved painter—best known for his Romantic seascapes—helped bring the second highest price ever paid for a 19th-century Russian painting at auction.

WOMAN IN TOP HAT
Boris Dmitrievich Grigoriev
SOLD $1.1 million, Sotheby’s London, December 2004
DETAILS A Russian paid more than triple the high estimate for this 1919 canvas (left), which exemplifies the influence of the German avant-garde on Grigoriev’s work.

FABERGE SILVER SAMOVAR
SOLD $525,300, Sotheby’s London, December 2004
DETAILS Created in Moscow in 1899–1908, the piece is crafted in the form of Leshi, the spirit of the forest in Russian folklore. The price reflects the growing interest in Fabergé among Russians.

PROPAGANDA PORCELAIN PLATE
Alexandra Shchekotikhina-Pototskaya
SOLD $244,600, Christie’s London, November 2003
DETAILS Designed in 1921, the plate (right) features the phrase “Long Live the Eighth Congress of the Soviets.” Despite the well-remembered horrors of the Soviet regime, the art it inspired is highly collectible.

STILL LIFE WITH FLOWERS
Ilya Ivanovich Mashkov
SOLD $3.7 million, Sotheby’s London, December 2005
DETAILS Competition was fierce for this 1912 painting (far left), a magnificent work by a leading member of the Jack of Diamonds group of artists. The fact that it had rarely been seen publicly and was fresh to the market helped push the bidding way beyond the estimate to the stunning record price.

ODALISQUE
Boris Mikhailovich Kustodieff
SOLD $2.9 million, Christie’s London, November 2005
DETAILS This 1919 canvas, once owned by the collector Leo Maslovskii, is a classic example of the voluptuous females that recur in Kustodieff’s work. The result was more than 85 times the sum paid when it was last sold in 1989.
auction houses must look elsewhere for consignments.

Back in 1989 Tiesenhagen was invited to the flat of a Munich woman who wanted to sell some art to pay for her move to a nursing home. As it turned out, she was the widow of Leo Maskovskii, an important Russian collector who had escaped to the Baltic region in the twenties. Tiesenhagen was stunned to find a group of a dozen paintings, missing for decades, by such admired artists as Boris Mikhailovich Kustodieff, Isaak Ilich Levitan, and Konstantin Andreevich Somov. In a subsequent sale at Christie’s, several works fetched strong prices for that time, including Kustodieff’s 1919 Orientalist nude, Odaligane, which went for $34,000. When Christie’s resold the picture this past November, it brought $2.9 million.

Many of Russia’s newly rich, who built their fortunes capitalizing on the Soviet Union’s collapse, are keen to display their patriotism by returning cultural treasures to their homeland. Recently the Moscow government revised its tax laws to make it less expensive for them to do so. These buyers now regard the buyer of the Forbes Collection of Fabergé Imperial Eggs for a reputed $100 million in 2004, as well as Vladimir Potanin, who controls the world’s leading nickel-producing company and is a supporter of the Guggenheim and Hermitage museums. For others, however, art is just another luxury lifestyle accessory or, increasingly, a fashionable investment.

Tiesenhagen is, of course, discreet about his Russian clientele. They are different from Americans and Western Europeans, he says, explaining that Russians tend to be cautious at first and then very decisive. “They never make the same mistake twice—not only in the auction world but also in business,” he notes. “Russians love advice, but they always make the decision. They’re extremely fast learners.”

Russian buyers certainly have the resources. According to Forbes magazine, Moscow boasts more billionaires than any city except New York. Demand for Fendi bags, Patek Philippe watches, and Bentleys is soaring. Brioni’s sales in Moscow now exceed those in Milan, Manhattan, or Paris. As the tastes of Russia’s rich become more sophisticated, many believe their focus will shift even more to art, especially with all the huge new homes that need to be decorated.

The challenge for the auction houses is finding the right works for a rapidly evolving market. Russians initially concentrated on paintings, but they are showing greater interest in decorative arts. A more significant development—and one eagerly anticipated in the West—is that collectors in Russia are beginning to branch out beyond their own country’s art. Already some have begun acquiring Impressionist, modern, and contemporary pieces.

**On Show in Moscow**

Clamoring to gain a direct line to Russia’s pool of billionaires, some 70 top European and American dealers took part in last September’s Moscow World Fine Art Fair, the country’s first such high-end international show. Sleek black Audis with tinted windows lined up outside the newly restored Manège while the owners shopped for art to decorate opulent homes and dachas. Among the Russian elite in attendance were Peter Aven, president of Alfa Bank, Leonid Friedland, the mastermind behind a luxury shopping village outside Moscow, and Victor Vekslberg, the country’s biggest art buyer, who plans to open at least one private museum for his collection. New York dealer Richard Feigen says the language barrier was a major obstacle, explaining, “You couldn’t tell the buyers from the bodyguards.” Further complicating matters is the fact that Russians typically use advisors and other middlemen. “Most of what we’ve sold,” Feigen says, “has been through interior designers.” The fair’s next edition takes place from May 22 to 29.