

## Passion for Art

Passion for Art .....	1
Soviet Period: the Beginnings .....	1
We are Collectors (Israeli period) .....	12
Reflections on Art .....	36
Lydia Mandel .....	43
Ira Rileeva (Reichwarger) .....	53
Greece .....	68
Cortona and Signorelli .....	77
Legends on artists .....	85
About Susana Valadon .....	94
Russian icon .....	98

## Acknowledgements.

I am infinitely grateful

to Ludmila Milman for taking care of me and her advices,

to Vladimir Milman and Miriam Herzberg for taking care of my bad English in a number of places of these texts,

to Tatyana Petrova for her help with files

to Alex Segal for introducing me to Google voice typing system, and

to Jan Rauchwerger for his help in all aesthetic matters.

# Passion for Art

## Soviet Period: the Beginnings.

When I was a child in Odessa and later during my university years in Kharkov, I was completely uninterested in art. Only in the beginning of 1960s something began to stir in me. I, of course, visited museums before but they did not leave any impression on me.

I remember very well that the first time when I was truly impressed by art was at the Louvre exhibition in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow. There was a long line at the entrance, but I visited it three times. During one of the visits I was apparently so engrossed in watching paintings that another visitor walked around me and photographed me several times. When I noticed him he was embarrassed, but we understood each other: he was simply fascinated by my intense attention to paintings. I was also embarrassed because I was dressed quite poorly. Maybe, it was this combination of a poorly dressed young man and the intense perception of art that evoked this fascination.

I remember that after the Louvre exhibition I was constantly looking for painting reproductions and studying works of art. Finding a reproduction was not a simple task those days. We did not have money to buy them, but my various friends owned reproductions and let me look at them. It was very difficult to find good colour reproductions. I think that Borya Rosenfeld, who was a friend of my brother Petya and later a friend of mine, was my main “supplier”. He brought us amazing art books (of course, he only let us browse through them).



I remember that at first I was interested in portraits, in human faces, in the depiction of character, willpower, subordination or, conversely, authority.

But soon I became chiefly interested in colour and in the influences of the Russian avant-garde. I believe that my entire love of art grew out of the Russian avant-garde, although before that I was fascinated with the Impressionism. One could actually see Impressionist paintings in Soviet museums, which could not be said about the Russian avant-garde works. I don't understand why it was completely banned by the authorities. Even Chagall's works were not allowed in the museums, while Robert Falk's paintings were first exhibited in the Tretyakov Gallery only in the early 1970s.

## Art Collector George Kostakis (also, Costakis), 1912-1989 The Greek Who Saved the Russian Avant-garde

We were lucky. Someone (I don't remember who it was) helped us visit the apartment of the great art collector George Kostakis.

His story merits a separate mention. He was a Greek who did not hold a Soviet citizenship. He remained in Russia after the Communist revolution and worked in the Canadian embassy, I believe as the head of maintenance. Of course, his salary was enormous by Soviet standards and he could afford buying anything he wished. And there was just one thing that he loved and coveted – art. He owned two twinned 4-room apartments that were full of paintings. He decided to specialize in Russian art, and specifically in Russian avant-garde art. To maintain good relations with the authorities he donated amazing paintings that had nothing to do with Russian avant-garde to local museums. For example, he presented the Pushkin Museum with a painting by Kees Van Dongen, which is still his only work held by a Russian museum.

Kostakis also owned many paintings of non-avant-garde Russian painters. For example, he had a room that was full of Russian religious icons. I remember that once he told me that he had about 900 such paintings, but maybe I got the number wrong. Perhaps, it was “only” 90.

And so, it was in his house that I first saw original works by Wassily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall and other avant-garde painters. For some reason, I don't remember Kazimir Malevich's paintings among them, but my first encounter with many of the most important names in the Russian avant-garde art occurred at his house. It was a miracle, I could not take my eyes off of them, could not leave! After my first visit I was at his place twice more, and we even became friends. What we had in common was the enormous love of art. Here is another story about him.

Once, when we came to his apartment he was looking at a new painting, his new acquisition. It was a winter landscape, but it had some interesting colours. Take a guess, he asked me, who is the painter? I was not sure and replied, "Judging by the colours, it must be Kuindzhi, but it does not look like him". Very good, said Kostakis, but it is not Kuindzhi, it is his pupil, Kandinsky. It was a very unusual Kandinsky, and the painting was created long before the period in his work that we all know. Kandinsky was born in 1866, but did not become a professional artist before 1900. He studied with Arkhip Kuindzhi, travelled all over the world and enjoyed art, but worked as an engineer. He lived in Munich for a very long time, and in the Kandinsky Museum in Munich it is possible to see his very early works, but none before 1900. The paintings there are quite identifiable as Kandinsky's works, even if they are realistic. But the painting that Kostakis showed to me was completely different. It was painted long before 1900, at the time when Kandinsky did not yet think of becoming a professional artist. Kostakis explained to us (I was there with my wife) that he checked where Kandinsky travelled for work (it was usually to various provincial towns in the north of Russia). Then he sent there some young guys who were well-versed in art and worked for him. They looked for his surviving paintings in private apartments, and managed to find this work (I did not ask what pittance he paid for it – it is not really important, because he did manage to save it).

By the way, stories like that happen all the time. I remember that about 60 years ago an expert in England found a Van Gogh at a flea market. He painted it during his English period and someone who was not an expert would never be able to attribute it to him. After reselling it the man bought a new house. Once in the English city of Durham, where

I was at a conference, my wife found a small African figurine. It is the best African figurine in our collection. The price tag on it read "20". My wife without thinking gave the seller a 20 pound banknote and got change, because the price was 20p!

Therefore, we first encountered original Russian avant-garde paintings (not reproductions) at Kostakis' apartment. We also learned many names of great painters of that time, about whom we had never heard before. Today all of them are presented in the Tretyakov Gallery and in museums in Saint-Petersburg.

A little bit more about Kostakis: he had two daughters who married Russian men, and a son. None of them had any interest in art, and Kostakis decided to take his collection out of Russia and found a museum in Greece (eventually, he opened it in Thessaloniki). It happened after our departure from Russia, and because I did not witness this story personally I'll just quote from an article that I found on the internet. Kostakis owned "a collection of thousands of paintings, sculptures and other artworks by early 20th-century artists including Marc Chagall, Kazimir Malevich, Wassily Kandinsky, Vladimir Tatlin, Alexander Rodchenko, Lyubov Popova, Olga Rozanova and El Lissitzky. After Mr. Costakis gave 80 percent of his paintings to the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow in 1977, Soviet authorities permitted him to take about 1,200 artworks out of the country the next year, when he and his family moved to Greece... After burglaries and a fire at his Moscow apartment and country dacha, Mr. Costakis decided to leave the Soviet Union in 1977. Under an agreement with the Soviet Government, the Tretyakov Gallery received the bulk of his immensely valuable collection".

According to this article, he was allowed to take 1,200 works with him. At the time I heard that he was allowed to take only 275 Russian avant-garde paintings. This figure is confirmed in the article: "1981 show of 275 works at the Guggenheim Museum in New York called "Art of the Avant-Garde in Russia: Selections from the George Costakis Collection." I believe that there is no contradiction between these two figures. Simply, various things can be called "art works". He had 275 oil

paintings, and an additional number of drawings, sketches and other items.

Many years later I saw works from the Kostakis' collection in several museums. For example, in the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum (actually, in its new wing that was created by Carmen, Hans Thyssen's wife). She began filling her wing with works of art in mid-1980s and apparently around that time bought some paintings from Kostakis. Naturally, Kostakis needed to sell some of them to make a living. We wanted very much to see the Kostakis' collection that we used to know so well, once again. Unfortunately, we were not always lucky. We had the best opportunity to see it in Vienna. We came there for 2 months and saw that at that time the collection was exhibited in the city. We got settled and two days later dashed to see it. Unfortunately, the exhibition closed the day before! Such a bad luck!

Let me digress and say a few words about the Thyssen collection. Its richness is legendary. We saw it before it was relocated to Madrid. Hans Thyssen was a Swiss national and lived in Lugano, in the only Italian-speaking canton in Switzerland. We came there especially from Zurich (a 2-hour drive through the mountains). I even came there twice.

The collection was housed in Thyssen's villa, Villa Favorita. To avoid paying taxes, Thyssen opened it to public on certain days and hours. My Swiss friend and colleague, Hans Jarchow, who was a professor of mathematics in the University of Zurich, took me there. As it happens, when Thyssen grew older he decided to give the entire collection to a museum. However, its size and quality were unique. It holds arguably the best Raphael and one of the best Durer in existence. Therefore, there was a need to build a new special museum to house the collection. But the leaders of the canton decided that he was wealthy enough and should build it at his own expense. I will refrain here from calling them "idiots". They simply did not understand the psychology of the collector. Of course, he had enough money, but he wanted to see that the city would look after his works. And if they refused even to finance a building that would house a billion dollar collection, they surely would not take a proper care of it. His Spanish wife then flew to Madrid and in two days made an arrangement with the Spanish government

that, firstly, Madrid would allocate a grand old building just across the square from the Prado Museum for a new Prado wing and that this wing would house the Thyssen collection. Additionally, the Spanish agreed to build another wing behind this building for the wife's own collection. It was there that we saw several art works from Kostaki's collection. By the way, it is a wonderful new museum. For example, it has 3 Van Goghs.

Going back to Kostakis, I recall that it was at his place that we met a wonderful artist, Ilya Kleiner. It so happened that his cousin was a friend of mine, a mathematician from Kharkov (I think it was Mark Goldberg). Some of my friends and I loved his highly abstract paintings, although he was able of creating great non-abstract works as well. I even bought one of his paintings, despite the fact that it was not easy for me financially. My brother and Borya Rosenfeld also bought his paintings, maybe even more than one. So there was a special relationship between us.

A wonderful story happened to Kleiner (and, actually, to me as well) in the summer of 1973 when we just got a permit to leave for Israel. For the first time in many years Chagall came to Moscow and unexpectedly received a royal welcome. For the first time his works were exhibited in the Tretyakov Gallery. We travelled to Moscow from Chernogolovka and I called Ilya. He was very excited and told me that Chagall stayed in hotel such and such and that he together with two other young artists decided to go there and try to meet him. Of course, it sounded like a crazy plan but they decided to go for it and asked me to join. But I had to go back to Chernogolovka and could not make it.

Next day I called Ilya. This time he was excited to such an extent that he was barely able to speak. It turned out that they came to the hotel and Chagall agreed to meet them. They came up to his room and had a conversation with him. Before they left Chagall took one of his colour lithographs and signed it 'To dear Ilya Kleiner from Marc Chagall'. He was the only one who received a picture from Chagall. Ilya said that when they were leaving the room Chagall's wife ran after them saying, "Remember, it costs more than 20,000 dollar". Because they did not show their own works to Chagall, it made sense to me that I could have

impressed Chagall even more and got this lithograph instead of Ilya. It would have been both a great joy and a tragedy! If I had a work by Chagall I would never leave Russia. Ilya wanted to emigrate very much, but gave up this idea after Chagall's gift. He could not leave it behind, and taking Chagall with him was of course out of question.

Soon I came to his house to look at his Chagall. It hung on the wall proudly displaying the personal dedication. Ilya took down all his own works that used to hang on that wall. He said, "My works cannot hang on the wall side by side with Chagall's. You will take them with you to Israel". And this is what I did. It was not so simple. I asked for an official permission to take them out of the country, but my request was denied. When I asked the authorities for the reason given that they would not allow to display them in museums, I got an amazing reply: "We do not want to disseminate such art, it is like infection". I asked, "You mean that I can just destroy these paintings right here?" "Go ahead", they answered. Nevertheless, I managed to take them with me, albeit illegally.

I had no contact with Ilya after I left Russia, but I heard that he disapproved of my actions in Israel. He thought that I should have given his paintings to a museum. He did not understand that it was simply impossible. Once I even tried to discuss this, but was almost laughed at. Jewish millionaires frequently donate paintings from their collections to Israeli museums, and almost invariably they find their way to store rooms. And I refer here to Chagalls, Renoirs and works of art of the same calibre. They do not bother to take works of lesser standards.

Still, for quite a long time Ilya's paintings hung in my apartment and made me happy. Later, I bought numerous high quality works, including many oil paintings. None of Ilya's works were oil paintings (except for one small picture that he presented to me before the Chagall story). I, of course, kept his works. But today, my store room also holds tens if not hundreds of works of art. Therefore, Ilya's paintings do not hang on my walls any more. My taste has changed, but I still love them.



Ilya Kleiner

Abram Chudnovsky,  
Russian Avant-garde Art Collector from Leningrad

We had a wonderful encounter with Russian avant-garde in Leningrad, in the house of the collector Abram Chudnovsky. Both he and his wife were professors of physics. Their son, who was roughly the same age as I, was a physicist as well. I don't remember how I met him, but many people knew that I loved art and one of my physicist friends probably told him about me. During one of our trips to Leningrad he invited us to his house. It was a 4 room apartment with walls covered with paintings (paintings even hung on doors). We saw there many works by avant-garde painters that hitherto we had not been familiar with. Maybe Kostakis had their paintings as well, but I did not pay attention to them because I was simply overwhelmed with new information. This time, I, for example, noticed Nathan Altman. From this visit, I remember two anecdotes.

Chudnovsky-senior worked at his desk, but apparently he also watched me and saw my intense and loving appreciation of the paintings. I stood in front of Kandinsky's painting and he told me, "Vitali, take it in your hands. Do not be afraid, it is quite a robust object, nothing will happen to it..." I took the Kandinsky's painting and held it in my hands. Fifty years have passed and I still remember the feeling.

Later we started a conversation He felt that I too would become a collector and gave me an advice: "If you like a painting and ask how

much it costs, or see a price tag on it, do not bargain. Remember, this person creates art, not just sells some product at a market stall. Do not hurt his feelings by driving a bargain with him, even if it is an expensive work. Then, next time, he will sell you his best work and will not ask much for it". I remembered his advice and, to be frank, used it sometimes when I was afraid that I didn't have enough money. One example (Jan, one of my best friends, will read this piece and probably wag a finger at me): once, in 1990s, Jan drew a pencil portrait of our daughter Anat. It was an amazing portrait and I love it today as strongly as I loved it then, but I was afraid to ask him how much it cost. So I took a blank cheque, signed it and gave it to him. "Put there any price that you think is right", I told him. When a bank statement arrived, I saw that it cost much less than I feared it would cost.

Later, when we already left Russia, Chudnovskys' apartment was attacked. I do not have a personal knowledge of this story, so I will just quote here from a piece that I saw on the internet: "Abram Chudnovsky, collector of Russian avant-garde paintings from Leningrad. He began collecting avant-garde paintings in 1953 and after several decades established himself as one of the most important collectors of this school of painting. He owned works by Natalia Goncharova, Marc Chagall, Kazimir Malevich, Alexander Rodchenko and other great artists".

In 1978, 23 of his possessions were stolen from his apartment. The Chudnovskys believed that it was done by KGB. His son, a physicist whom I knew personally, was tied up. Chudnovsky asked the Academy of Sciences to help him, and 11 paintings were located and returned to him. Later Felix, the son who was tied up during the robbery, emigrated to US. The epic story of the return of the stolen paintings, some of which surfaced on the market, was not over before the end of the century. I don't know what happened to them.

A brief afterword: in 1999 my friend, the artist Jan Rauchwerger, spent several years in New York. When I visited the city I naturally came to his studio. By a coincidence, Felix Chudnovsky came there with his wife exactly at the same time. We did not recognize each other and he did not remember my visit to his parents' apartment, but I still told him how grateful I was to him, and that this visit left a lasting impression upon

me.

## The Okunev Collection

We were lucky to visit another enormous collection of Russian art in Leningrad: the Okunev collection. A young mathematician from Leningrad, whom I once met at a conference, learned about my fascination with art and told me that one of his neighbours had a huge collection of Russian art and he could help us see it. Unfortunately, the owner who assembled it had already died, but his wife kept everything in the same order as he left it. The widow let us see it, and I was very grateful to her. Actually, today when I am a collector myself, I understand that showing your collection to other people actually gives you an aesthetic pleasure.

We visited just one room, but it was very big and the walls were covered with paintings from the floor to the ceiling with no gaps between them. Most of the paintings belonged to the 19th century and there were very few pictures from early 20-th century. In other words, it was old classic Russian art. Still, the collection was very interesting. There were several avant-garde paintings, but only one of them made a strong and lasting impression upon us. It was a work by Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin. The painting was huge and resembled a Russian icon painted in red and blue. I think that never before or after a modern icon-styled work made such an impression upon us. Probably, it is the best work by Petrov-Vodkin, even better than his famous Red Horses.



The owner told us the story of this painting. The only daughter of Petrov-Vodkin was married to a plumber. None of them had any interest in art. After the death of the great artist, all that his son-in-law wanted was to exchange his paintings for vodka. He would give a drawing for a bottle, and for a couple of bottles you could get a small painting. This amazing huge oil painting cost the owners a crate of vodka! The woman even told us that they could easily take Red Horses instead, but it was too big and they couldn't figure out how to move it into their apartment, and therefore decided to take this painting. Because of it we found it hard to leave the room. We probably saw it again recently in one of the museums (I believe it was in the new General Staff Building Museum across the square from the Hermitage: by the way, it is a fine building and a remarkable collection as well). We saw there an identical painting by Petrov-Vodkin (I enclosed a photo above), and I believe that it was the same painting that we saw in the Okunev collection. But for some reason our first impression was so strong that anything that we saw afterwards cannot match it. Therefore, it seemed to us that its quality was a little bit lower than the old one's quality and Luda actually thought that it was not the same work. The one that we saw at Okunev's apartment was larger (although it is difficult to judge size by a photo). I think that there was much more space on the left of the face.

Lives of artists, especially of great artists, are rarely enviable. Here I do not refer only to Petrov-Vodkin, but to all great artists collectively.

### Robert Falk's Apartment.

The last story from our Soviet period is about my visit to the apartment of the artist Robert Falk. His widow was still alive then and let people visit their apartment and see his paintings. We even managed to visit her twice (she was his second wife and was much younger than he). Again, I do not remember who put us in touch with her. Usually, she gathered a small group of people (about 10) at an appointed day and hour in the apartment, gave a small talk and then led the group to a well preserved attic that housed numerous Falk's works. Falk was a

wonderful artist. According to the 20<sup>th</sup> century standards, he was a realist, but in terms of forms and colours he represented a mix of Impressionism and Russian avant-garde. Later, in early 1970s, his works were already exhibited in the Tretyakov Gallery (even before Chagall's paintings)

His widow told us that Falk stayed in Europe, probably in France, up to 1936. In 1936 Stalin ordered all Soviet citizens who lived abroad to return before 1937. Falk loved Russia and hurried to come back. He actually crossed the Russian border on the New Year night of 1937. "He didn't want to be late", she said with bitter irony. Nothing awaited him in Russia: no one had money to buy his works and the authorities did not encourage this type of art. He was not sent to the Gulag, but was simply ignored. He lived in poverty and even starved. Falk died many years later; according to his wife, he practically starved to death. Such was the fate of this great artist.

## We are Collectors (Israeli period)

The living room in our apartment in Ramat Hasharon (c. 2000). Our 5-room apartment is filled with paintings.



We immigrated to Israel in the summer of 1973. For several years prior to that, I was unable to engage in mathematical research because the process of leaving Soviet Union was very difficult and required a huge effort. I looked for some other occupation at this time, and so I became interested in art almost professionally. Small wonder then the very minute I arrived in Israel I looked for contacts with the newly arrived artists. However, today I do not remember how I met them and how we found each other.

The first immigrant artist that we met was Valya Shapiro. Less than 6 months after our arrival we met Jan and Ira Reichwarger. Among non-recent immigrant Israeli artists I was friendly with Aaron Giladi, and later especially with Fima (born Ephraim Roeytenberg). Among the artists that came to Israel in 1990s I was very close to Valery Konevin, and knew some other painters as well. For example, I own great drawings by Leonid Balaklav.

Below I would like to discuss art and how I see and sense it. But I cannot ignore the creators of this art, and I will write briefly about them as well. Our understanding of art, its inner workings as well as the feelings that it evokes in us is strongly related to its creators.

Van Gogh's popularity is a classic example of it. Everyone knows that his works did not sell for many years after his death, but the interest in them soared after the wife of Van Gogh's brother Theo published the correspondence between the brothers (this is of course an oversimplification: some of the letters became well known and made an impression 15 years before the rest of the correspondence was published and helped make Van Gogh's art acceptable).

In other words, from time to time I will discuss here artists that I knew personally. Of course, I am not objective: I love these men and women very much, I suffer when they do not succeed and I am happy when they enjoy a success.

Among the artists, our relations with Jan and Ira were special. No one else came close to the level of friendship that existed between us. So I will first say a few words about them. I will begin with their name. At first, Jan used to spell his name Reichwarger. Ira's maiden name was

Rileeva, but after she married Jan she took his name, Reichwarger, and left it after the divorce. She died in an accident in 2002 at the age of 50.

I wrote a separate essay about this amazing sculptor and painter. She was an extremely talented person with a tragic fate. She created 'soft sculpture', and her dolls and dolls' ensembles made of wool with nylon framework caused a sensation. She was able to use this material even to make portraits. It is difficult to put this miracle into words and explain the power of expression that these ostensibly primitive works had. Later, she began to paint, mostly watercolours and gouaches (she rarely used oil). We have numerous works of hers in our collection, and we could even have more, but we simply did not have enough room. Her drawings, watercolours and gouaches fill several albums.

We gave her works as presents to all our friends. As I already mentioned above, I wrote a separate essay about her and enclosed pictures of some of her works. Ira had an emotional bond with my family. We loved any and all works that she created; each one of them stirred something in us. Therefore, my wife Luda who loved her works as well was sometimes reluctant to visit her. "Once again we will come home with lots of her works", she would say. "What are we going to do with them"? She was right; we had to put many of them in storage, and some of them we later gave away to our friends.

## Jan Rauchwerger

I will now go back to Jan. At some point, he learned that the English spelling of his name should be Rauchwerger. So, eventually Jan's and Ira's names were spelled differently

Jan and I have been friends for 47 years. In Israel we do not have anyone who is closer to us. We joke that we know each other since the day he was born (he is younger than me so it cannot be the other way round). And it is not completely a joke. He was born during World War II in small town of Bayram-Ali near the Iranian border after his family was evacuated there. Our family had been evacuated to this town as well, and I even remember him a little. I was 4 years old then, already a big boy! It is a funny coincidence. Our parents surely knew each other then.



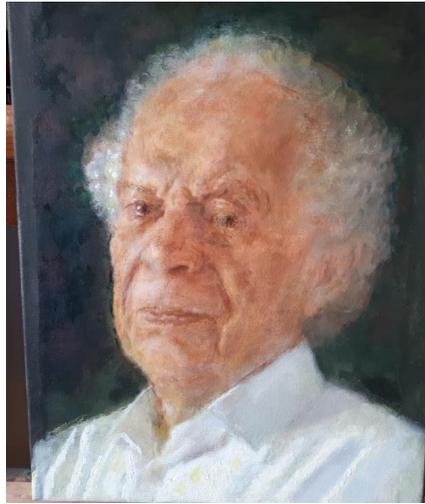
Jan is a man of high culture and a great artist. Our house is full of his works. My entire taste and understanding of art changed under his influence.

Jan is extremely versatile. When he first came to Israel, he painted mostly portraits; later he frequently came back to this genre. There are numerous portraits by Jan in our house. He painted me three times.

He painted my first portrait several years after I arrived in Israel. I came back home after my first army service as a reservist, and we went to Jan to “boast” that I was a soldier. Jan immediately grabbed a canvas and sketched me. When today I look at this portrait on my wall, I am not sure what he painted it with. Later, just before my 50<sup>th</sup> birthday, he did an oil portrait of me. It was later exhibited in Tel Aviv Museum at a major exhibition of Jan’s works and also travelled to Moscow for Jan’s exhibition there.



1989



2019

He painted my third portrait not long ago, just before my 80th birthday. It conveys me and my personality really well, but I look very old on it (maybe 10 or 15 years older than I am today). Luda says that in her opinion in reality I look much younger, and therefore she does not want to have it in our house. I agree with her, but the portrait is remarkable and extremely precise.

Today, when I look at Jan's paintings I learn and understand many things. For example, I understand why I sometimes smile in a photograph, but never in a portrait. A photograph captures just one moment, and I can accidentally smile during it. But a portrait captures a person in his or her entirety for many years, maybe even for the lifetime. It took more than one minute, and even more than one year for wrinkles to form on my face. As a portraitist, Jan sees my entire history as it is reflected on my face, and not just one momentary smile.



Photo, 2019 (cf. the portraits)

I made another discovery through Jan's portrait of our grandson Yonatan. I finally realized and sensed the meaning of Impressionism. Yonatan was three and a half years old when Jan painted his portrait. When we saw it we got a distinct feeling that Yonatan had just ran into the room. Today, several years later, the portrait hangs in our room and the presence of little Yonatan is felt in it.



It is our tradition that when a little member of our family reaches the age of three and a half Jan paints his or her portrait. This tradition began

with little Emmanuel. In 1980 we came back from America and Emmanuel was three and a half years old. Jan painted his portrait. Later, we commissioned him to do a portrait of Anat when she was three and a half and then of two of our grandchildren, Yonatan and Yahel. Anat's portrait was so good that the director of Tel Aviv Museum asked Jan to give it to the museum, but Jan replied that it was the gift to the child's father and the painting remained with us.

Yahel's portrait is also a work of the highest quality. Its style is reminiscent of the style of August Renoir's son's portrait that Renoir also painted when the boy was three and a half years old. It is easy to compare between them and the comparison is clearly in Jan's favour.



Jan painted several portraits of Luda, but none of them with oil. All of them hang in our living room.

Jan also painted my father and mother. He did this after both of them died, but he knew them well and therefore was able to depict them accurately.

Once I hosted Yuval and Dvora Ne'eman. They loved my father's portrait (they knew him personally) and I put them in touch with Jan, who did two portraits of Yuval. One of them was shown at the same exhibition in Tel-Aviv Museum as my own portrait by Jan.

Well, it seems that I can't write enough about Jan's portraits, but as an artist he is much more than just a portraitist. We have several of his landscapes depicting orange groves as well as views of Jaffa and still lifes. He is an extremely versatile and prolific artist who works in all genres. I know numerous Israeli painters, but none of them fascinated me as much as Jan did and none evoked the same level of emotion.

### Valya Shapiro.

We were in touch with her during our first years in Israel. Later, she relocated to Paris and we met her there as well. Through her we met the famous Russian art collector Katia Granoff who at that time was already about 80 years old. Katia Granoff began collecting art in 1910s, when she and her sister came to Paris from Russia. During these early years of Postimpressionism and the beginnings of Russian avant-garde, her impeccable taste and understanding of art helped her, a poor immigrant, to assemble an ample art collection. For example, she told us how she discovered Raoul Dufy. Later, she helped young artists who came to Paris from Russia. When we met her in 1975, she owned two galleries in the most fashionable places in Paris as well as galleries all over France. I described our meeting in my essay about Lidiya Mandel. She intended to help Valya Shapiro as well and that was why Valya brought us to her.

But now I would like to talk about Valya. Her fate was bitterer than Van Gogh's. She studied art in Moscow. One of her fellow students was a sister of the great mathematician Vladimir Arnold, who owned many of her works. I knew about some of her problems from him. She lived with her mother in an abject poverty. Sometimes in Moscow she even fainted from hunger. But she was an extremely strong-willed person. She had a talent and wanted to succeed. We bought from her several drawings and two oil paintings. They broadcast such pain and tension that it was hard to keep them in an apartment. These works belong to a museum. It was not just about their quality, but rather about emotional tension in them. I would imagine the same was true about Van Gogh's paintings. I would not want to have them in my apartment: I would have simply gone mad.

Valya's life was in her paintings. To explain her personality I will cite the following example: she was unable to eat in the presence of other people. When she spent a night in our apartment, we used to leave food in her room. She was not as poor in Israel, but the food phobia stayed with her for a long time. When we met in Paris she wanted to show us that she had changed. She invited us to a café, and told us that she just wanted some coffee. In other words, she was now able to drink something else than water when other people were present, but still not to eat.

Unfortunately, we lost contact with her. I heard that she married a Swiss and had a daughter and even came with her to Israel for a visit. I probably was out of country at that time. I am very happy to know that things turned out well for her. On the other hand, I don't want to know what happened next because I am afraid that her later life was not as happy.

I sometimes come across her works in my house and each encounter confirms my opinion that she had a potential to be a great artist. But I don't know what became of her.



Valya Shapiro

## A few words about Aaron Giladi (1907 – 1993)

I believe that it was Jan who introduced me to Aaron Giladi. He was then about 70. He spoke Russian because he immigrated to Palestine during 1910s or 1920s from Russia or Ukraine. He was a very nice man and a very good artist. His main theme was family and he produced scores of such paintings. I own a few of them. But he also painted wonderful works of a very different type. When we already lived in Israel he spent a year in Paris, and after his return, there was a large exhibition of his works. We came to see it and saw Jan at the entrance. I asked him what I should buy. Giladi would probably come up to me when he spots me in the hall and I will have to choose something right away, but I am unable to appreciate art when I am in a hurry. “You will see there a painting of a garden in Paris. It is a very good work”, said Jan. My wife and I strolled around the exhibition hall with Giladi and passed the painting that Jan described. I immediately recognized it and told him, “Oh! I want this one. How much is it?” I asked then quite apprehensively. Giladi was happy: “You chose the best one right away”. And he named a very modest price (I think, 600\$). It was quite like Giladi to ask for a moderate price for his best work. It is actually a psychological thing: people who understand art don’t have large sums of money to spend, while a nouveau-riche believes that something is wrong with the picture if the price is not high.



Giladi's "family-themed" painting



I would like to go back to what I wrote before about being unable to appreciate art when I am in a hurry. It is important because this is what distinguishes a professional from an amateur. I am but an amateur and I need to look at the picture for a long time and get used to it before I can decide if I really want it in my house. Luda is able to understand this right away. She has a great taste and can spot good paintings in no time. But I prefer asking “to loan” me a picture for several weeks, so that it will hang in our house. And only after some time I either give it back or understand that I can’t live without it. Of course, one can do this with friends, but not at auctions. At Israeli auctions I always asked Jan to tell me what I should buy. In Paris I always rely on Luda’s taste and it never let me down!

Going back to Giladi: this wonderful man understood that as new immigrants we do not have money to buy even our favourite paintings.

During the first years of our acquaintance there were several funny stories. A friend of mine got married. At that time, we, Russian immigrants, were not yet used to simply give cheques: it looked to us almost unseemly. So, I was looking for a present, and, of course, I went

to Giladi to choose a painting, and explained to him what I needed it for. We went up to the second floor where he had his studio and he began going over the paintings. He took one painting, named the price, took another one, and so on. The prices were so small that I could not help myself and bought all paintings for myself. It was clear that he did not want his wife downstairs to know about it.

Several years later I asked him (along with other painters) to donate their works to the new math building in the university. He selected three small paintings that were supposed to be framed together and asked me not to tell his wife. They still hang in the building, but unfortunately they are degrading, and I am afraid they cannot be restored (I tried, but it was not possible): 40 years have passed since we received them.

And, finally, the last small memory about Giladi. I don't remember if it was at his house or somewhere else, but he once took a matchbox and drew his typical family scene on it. I have kept the matchbox already for 35 years.

### Fima (Ephraim Roeytenberg), 1916 – 2005

I met Fima probably through Jan as well. It was in mid-1970s, so he must have been about 60 years old (he was born in Harbin, China, in 1916). Fima was his professional name, and that was how he signed his works and how everyone called him. He was a great draughtsman and had quite an unusual life.



His works were aesthetically very pleasing, but his oil paintings were too expensive for us. Below is a lithograph of a rickshaw from the WWII time (the light is on the bottom of the rickshaw vehicle due to wartime blackout). This work won a prize in a competition when Fima still lived in China.

Ha Dalpyes manuscript  
Butaduo a lode  
Illustration of  
- Puseu -  
Uapysau 1896..



This is an oil painting from 1989 (130X97cm) that we could not afford to buy at the time.



Fima spoke fluent Russian. Actually, his Russian was more classical and correct than ours. The reason for that was that the Harbin community was mostly Russian-Jewish. Its members were educated people who were sent there from Russia for various professional assignments. Among them were numerous Jews: in the Russian Empire Jews were more mobile than gentiles.

Jews of Harbin considered themselves Russian. All children went to a Russian gymnasium and spoke correct and elegant Russian. Of course, they spoke Chinese as well. Fima knew several more languages. After he came to Israel in 1949 he learned Hebrew, and he spoke English, French (he lived part of each year in France) and other European languages. His last wife was Finnish and he spoke Finnish as well.

I would like to recount here several fascinating stories that he used to tell me.

In 1949 the Chinese Communist Army captured all mainland China. Non-Chinese population in Harbin (or, maybe, Fima was in Shanghai at that time) could decide where to emigrate. As a Jewish member of the Russian community, Fima could choose between Israel and Russia, and as a person of Russian culture he chose Russia (many other community members did likewise). He already sent his entire luggage, and was about to leave. On the evening before his departure, there was a reception at the Russian Embassy. There were drinks and everyone had a good time and he became very close with a Russian officer who worked for the embassy. At this point the story becomes complicate. According to the version that Fima used to tell when the Soviet Union still existed (and Fima was much afraid of it), he asked the officer, "How is life in Russia?" "You will see when you get there", came an evasive answer. Fima did not like it one bit and decided to travel in the other direction. According to the second version that appeared after the fall of the Soviet Union, the officer whispered to Fima, "Flee while you still can".

In both versions Fima fled. Late at night he came to the office of the Jewish Agency (the organization that transports Jews to Israel) and explained the situation. He needed to go to Israel right away and could

not wait till the morning, because if he missed his flight to Russia the Russians would start looking for him. They give him someone else's seat on the plane to Israel and he left just in time.

But there was a problem. Fima had a fiancée, a non-Jewish Chinese woman; she could not get an Israeli visa and stayed in China. People in the Jewish Agency promised him to take care of the problem later, but nothing came out of it. The woman was pregnant and after Fima's departure gave birth to a son. Sometime later she wrote to Fima that since his attempts to get her a visa failed, she was leaving for Brazil and ending their relationship. This was the only information that Fima had about his son.

And here another fascinating story begins. I believe that Fima was married three times. We knew his last wife well. His previous two wives died from illnesses. He had 5 children besides the lost son. We knew all this for a couple of decades since we first met. Once, when we met after a long hiatus in his Jerusalem apartment he said to me, "Vitali, I found my son".

This is how it happened. A large exhibition of Fima's works took place in Paris. At the opening, a woman came up to him and expressed her admiration for his work; she introduced herself as a cultural attaché at the Brazilian Embassy in France. Just to make a conversation Fima mentioned that he believed he had a son in Brazil and told the woman his story. Of course, 50 years had passed and the mother and son could have easily left Brazil for some other country. He did not ask the attaché to do anything, but she asked him for details.

He gave her the woman's name that could of course have changed, an estimated date of his son's birth and the date when they emigrated to Brazil. After 3 months, the woman called him and said "I think I might have found your son". There were some discrepancies. The mother's name was different, and the son's name was not exactly the one that Fima remembered. But Fima immediately knew that he found his family. The name mentioned by the diplomat was his former fiancé's middle name, and the son's name was close enough to what he remembered.

"So, who is my son?" he asked. "He is the CEO (=the Head) of the Brazilian state airline company", answered the attaché. His son was a

clever man. He did not want to meet Fima right away. He understood that both of them needed time to get used to each other, see photographs and learn who the other person really was. After about a year Fima and all his 5 children received airline tickets to Brazil and flew there to meet their lost son and brother. He told Fima that a painting always hung above his bed and his mother used to tell him that it was painted by his father

As I already wrote above, unfortunately we do not have any oil paintings by Fima. But we do own several beautiful drawings and gouaches, like the ones that are displayed below:



Fima's works are aesthetically very pleasing. It is nice to have them in the house.

Valery Konevin (also Conevin)



Valery Konevin came to Israel with his family in 1990. A record number of immigrants arrived during this year from Soviet Union, and there were quite a few artists among them. Of course, it was hard for them to make a living.

Jan told me that a good artist had just arrived and was barely able to make both ends meet. Would I care to go and see his work? Luda and I of course agreed.

We liked his paintings, but the question as always was how much they cost. In other words, what the asking price was. As I already explained, I never bargain. Of course, this does not mean that I will pay any amount of money. The asking price determines whether I will buy the painting and ask for the price of another one. He requested a very modest sum (I think, 200\$) for a large oil painting. We immediately asked him about the next painting and did so 5 or 6 more times. Eventually, we bought all the paintings that we asked about. Valery's tactics worked. We left more money with him than we initially intended to do. And we frequently came back and brought our friends, all of whom bought his paintings as well. Valery called us his lucky charm and kept saying that he would never charge my friends more than he charged me. Of course, he was interested that they would keep coming.



Valery Konevin, Jaffa Port, 1992, 85x85cm Valery Konevin, A Bird, 1991,140x85cm

Valery is also a wonderful draughtsman. He never sold me any of his drawings and just gave them to me as a free supplement to the

paintings. Later, when he relocated to Belgium, he actually sold more drawings than paintings.

During that time my friend and co-author Jean Bourgain came to visit me. He was a truly great mathematician. At that time he was still a young man (he unfortunately died last year from a grave illness). We have at home his portrait by Jan. During his visit he was accompanied by his parents, first-rate medical doctors who also collected art. Of course, I took them to my artist friends, first to Jan, and then to Valery.

The story that I am going to tell here is an important one, and other artists will be well advised to learn from it. Jan showed them a painting that they liked, but asked for a very high price. He understood that they were well-to-do people and could afford it. But an art lover must first get used to a painting and get into sync with it. It is important to have it at your home for some time, so that you simply will be unable to part with it. In that case, you will pay even a higher amount of money. However, something like that can never happen right away when you just laid your eyes on the painting. You need to get used to it. Therefore, a painter will be well advised to sell first works to a new customer for a small amount of money. The Bourgain family did not buy anything from Jan.

Konevin behaved differently. His paintings were very beautiful and quite cheap. Given the price, one was inclined to make a decision swiftly, especially when the paintings were nice and pleasing. There was no risk in buying them. The Bourgain family bought three large paintings right on the spot. More importantly, they invited Valery to come to Ostend and exhibit his art at the University of Brussels. Jean's father, Rene Bourgain, was a professor there, and it was easy for him to get it done. He loved Valery's works very much and bought many of them after Valery moved to Belgium. The exhibition was quite a success as well, and he and his family relocated to Ostend.

I visited him there and he came back to Israel from time to time. Actually, my children love his works as well. They often took his painting from us. In the end, I think that our son has 15 of his oil paintings, and our younger daughter owns about 10. Our elder daughter bought his paintings when he still lived in Israel.

However, his life is not very easy. Ostend is a small town and very soon the market for his paintings reached a saturation point, so that today he does not sell paintings for a living.



Valery Konevin's drawings

I will digress to give a piece of advice to artists. Let us compare for a moment Konevin's policy with the policy and behaviour of another painter.

Roughly at the same time when Jan introduced us to Konevin, he showed us a work of a female artist. He told us the price and we immediately bought it. It was a very nice painting that depicted flowers. The artist's name was Svetlana Dubinskaya. Jan suggested that we visit her at her home and look at her other paintings. Probably, it would be better if he went with us, but we came alone. The outcome of the visit was disappointing for both parties. She asked three times more for a painting of the same size and lower quality. Eventually, we bought two paintings and paid a small fortune for them. The reason was that I wanted to buy something because I knew how difficult the life of new immigrants was. But we never bought anything from her again, although she invited us several time

## Leonid Balalkav



This remarkable artist also came to Israel with the immigration wave of 1990. I believe that he is distantly related to Jan. One late evening Jan called and asked me to meet with an artist. He explained that he lived in Jerusalem and badly needed money. But now he is in Tel Aviv. He said, let him come to you and paint your children. He has a very quick perception.

It was already after 9:00PM, and I was very tired. But the man needed money and it was a personal request from Jan, so I agreed. It took another hour before he arrived (public transportation is not very reliable in the evenings). I was tired and irritated, but what happened next amazed me. It took him about 20 minutes to sketch a portrait, which was very beautiful and perfectly resembled the subject. Those were not some street sketches, but true pencil portraits. Below is one such portrait sketch of my son (62x48cm) alongside a Jerusalem landscape.



In an hour and a half he sketched my daughter, my wife and me. We agreed that he would visit us again and we would bring our grandchildren from Haifa and offer our relatives to bring their children, so that he will be able to draw more portraits. We then repeated the session. And once again it turned out very well. Later, when he already established himself as a very popular artist, we visited his studio in Jerusalem and bought several drawings and small oil paintings. Frankly, I did not choose what I really wanted, but I followed Jan's instructions. In this case I probably should not have done this. Artists think about artistically significant works (as we, scientists, do in our fields), while we as consumers prefer attractive and beautiful items (as is the case with science, attractive works are not always significant). By the way, we gave several of his drawings as a present to Itamar Rabinovich prior to his appointment as Israeli ambassador to Washington (he was the rector of Tel Aviv University before that). I wanted him to hang these drawings in his office to help publicize the Russian Jewish immigration to Israel. We were very close at that time and he knew that I had a magnificent art collection and knew about art. I don't know what he did with them because we did not keep in touch. We have not been in touch with Balaklav for many years as well (we almost never come to Jerusalem).



Self-portrait in a Mirror.



Near a Synagogue; Jerusalem

However, this year the Herzliya Museum (an art museum in our city) set up a huge exhibition that included many works by Balaklav, Jan and several other artists.

The museum is located about 200 meters from our house but we had never visited it before. It turned out that it is a fine building, and that the exhibition was simply excellent. The Balaklav's works displayed a new style that we had not seen in his paintings before. They were painted on wood and were of a very high quality.



These days, because of our age, we do not buy art any more. Otherwise, we surely would have called him again.

This is all that I wanted to write about artists that I knew personally and whose works I have in my collection. However, I left out two important names: Ira Rileeva (Reichwarger) and Lydia Mandel. I dedicated two separate essays to them: Ira Rileeva (Married Name: Reichwarger) with an account of her tragic life, enormous talent and how the talent can destroy an individual, and The Artist Lydia Mandel.

I would like here to add a few words about another artist, whom I did not know personally. I refer to Vladimir Weisberg about whom I heard many stories from Jan and Ira, who used to be his students. I have several amazing watercolours by him. In fact, I even brought an

entire package of his watercolours (more than 70 paintings) to Israel from Paris. I have no idea how they wound up in Paris.



Vladimir Weisberg (Ira was the model for this painting in 1972); Drawing: Winter Landscape

Since I was the one who brought them to Israel I was given the first refusal right and chose 8 works. One of them I later presented to my friend Gilles Pisier as a prize for his brilliant proof of an important theorem. I used to frequently stay at Gilles' apartment and was always happy to see this remarkable watercolour and other works of art that I gave him during more than 40 years of our friendship and collaboration. He has drawings and oil paintings by Ira and Konevin's drawings.

Once in Paris we visited together a gallery that specialized in Weisberg's paintings. I loved one of the paintings (a Madonna in blue) so much that I thought of exchanging it for another Weisberg's oil painting that I owned plus some extra payment. However, a tragedy struck. The gallery owner left for Moscow to buy more paintings and never came back. He disappeared without a trace.

I need to say a few words about another prominent Israeli artist, Tanya Preminger. I did not write about her above because she is a sculptor, not a painter, and I mainly wrote about painters as I am not well-versed in sculpture. But Tanya's works are so brilliant that one does not have to be an expert in sculpture in order to be amazed and awed by many them. In the beginning of her career in Israel she created

sculptures that could be kept indoors, but later she moved to huge statues that she builds all over the world. They decorate city squares and sometimes look as part of nature. I am lucky to have two of her wooden sculptures. One of them is small; she gave it to me as a present. The other one is large, but I paid so little money for it that I am still embarrassed about it.



Of course, those two works by Tanya do not do justice to the variety and power of her ideas and skills. It would be very difficult for me to find two photos that can truly represent her work.

She has quite an amazing family. Her husband Osip is a brilliant carpenter. He is in fact an artist whose medium happens to be wooden furniture. All furniture in our apartment was built by him. Not long ago, when we decided to move, we actually looked for an apartment that will fit the furniture. We simply discarded all other furniture items and kept only the furniture built by Osip. At home I always work at the desk that he created.

In the beginning there was a desk that he built according to my sketches. There is a funny story about it: Pierre Deligne, one of the world's greatest mathematicians, once came to visit me. He saw my desk and asked me to sell it to him. "But how exactly are you planning to take it to Paris?" I asked him. "It won't be a problem, I'll find a way, I always dreamed about such desk", he answered. I think that I understand the reason. Esthetical qualities of a table are extremely important for its owner to be able to enjoy sitting and working at it. At

some point I became too used to the desk; at that time, Osip built a dining table for our living room. It is a splendid white round table and although we use it for meals when we entertain people, I really enjoy working at it as well.

## Reflections on Art

I have often pondered upon the origin of art, its evolution, trajectory (where from and where to), as well as, its power of attraction. All my thoughts on the subject are contradictory.

Sometimes, an example that I would like to bring tends to contradict rather than confirm my statement.

But in fact, all this fits together. Art simply has so many various facets that contradictions are necessary in order to be able to feel it in a more accurate way.

In modern history, art begins with sculpture. Sculpture is three-dimensional and, therefore, can be absolutely realistic without any abstraction.

Gradually, sculpture started to “stick to the wall”, to come out of the wall. And this was already a path to abstraction. Very slowly, a two-dimensional sculpture had emerged: almost a painting but not quite yet. A two-dimensional medieval painting is already an abstraction, although we are so accustomed to it that we consider it to be absolutely realistic. Slowly, the perspective and the three-dimensional perception of two-dimensional painting had emerged.

Before continuing I will contradict myself. I had an opportunity to see some very ancient murals. I visited the Cave of Altamira in the Pyrenees on the border between Spain and France. I was very lucky. The cave was closed the year I visited it (I think it was 1976), and has not been open to visitors since. The colours of the murals were affected by the visitors and by the fresh air that entered the cave when it was accidentally discovered (it appears that a tractor that worked there fell into a pit and that was how it became known). This is a typical story as such caves are often discovered in this manner. In the huge cave full of stalactites and

stalagmites there was only one relatively small room that had neither stalactites, nor stalagmites.



And in this very room there were stunning sketches of buffalos and other animals: some of them lying, some of them standing, but they all were dynamic, and they were in motion. Their contours, the contour lines of the drawings, resembled the contour lines of Henri Matisse's paintings. The ceiling of the cave was uneven of course and some animals fitted exactly with all the irregularities. If one accepts that it was a random discovery, that the cave was not the Louvre of the past, but rather one of many regular caves, then one feels lightheaded considering the level of mastery of the people who painted these murals. It is actually scary. The age of this cave is estimated at 25,000 years!

So where does the art begin? We do not have any knowledge about the sculptures of that period. However, as a mathematician, I see the evolution of art as the process of raising the level of abstraction in our understanding and perception of beauty and harmony.

Paintings from the period following the Renaissance and up to the Impressionism seem to us absolutely realistic. What is hidden from us are incredible discoveries and ideas that lie in this illusion of realism.

Everything is flat and two-dimensional, but nevertheless, there is a sense of three-dimensionality, of movement, and even a little bit of emotion in it.

Books have been written about this. I am wary of broaching this subject, although I have been always interested in it. On a somewhat trivial note, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century the paintings were static. The attempts to create a sense of movement had not been quite successful. The abstractions that created the illusion of movement in art were rooted in two sources: Japan and the rock art of Central Africa, which were completely abstract and created a sense of movement. Eugene Delacroix studied all these works of art and his canvasses already contain some degree of movement.

Then the Impressionism emerged, and emotions, the sense of air, and smells entered the paintings. The fine art got ahead of the photography. No photograph, at least for now, is able to convey the feeling of clean air, smell of flowers, or freshness of children, while the Impressionism can! Artists in power saw it, but were not able to paint this way. Their teachers did not teach them how to do so. And they avenged their own ignorance. That is why the impressionists had such a hard time, and that is why they starved or made their living by other means.

Let me go back in time and bring another example of a discovery that transformed the art of painting – the invention of oil paints. This event took place in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and brought a discrete and leap-like change to the evolution of art. In 1432, a new cathedral was opened in Ghent, and everyone was amazed by the frescoes of its altarpiece. The colours shone and sparkled. The term *Ghent Altarpiece* entered the lexicon of art.

It was created by the brothers Jan (1390 – 1441) and Hubert van Eyck (1370 – 1426). The rumour about the Ghent Altarpiece quickly spread to all centres of fine art of the time; however, it was difficult to retrain artists so that they would be able to paint in a new way. And so, the old masters for some time continued to use tempera.

Giovanni Bellini (1430 – 1516), the greatest master of his time, brought the technique of oil painting to Italy. Let us compare two Bellini's Madonnas: the first one was painted around 1460, still with tempera, the second was painted with oil after 1480s, after Bellini's visit to Ghent, where he studied the oil painting:



The bright painting on the right is painted with oil and tempera on wood.

I would also like to share a personal experience. In 1997, we were lucky to spend two months in Crete. We lived just a few kilometres away from the birthplace of El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos, 1541 – 1614). We stayed in a wonderful resort town of Agia Pelagia, about 20 kilometres from the capital of Crete, Heraklion. A little town of Fodele is located approximately three kilometres from us down the road from Heraklion, and then about two kilometres up the mountains. Tradition claims that El Greco was born there. We visited the town several times. It is a very pleasant spot to have lunch. However, it was not the only reason for our visits –we mainly enjoyed seeing the house, in which El Greco was born. And not even the house per se, as there was nothing interesting to see there at the time. Right next to it there is an incredibly

beautiful, almost toy-like Orthodox church. It is very small but very pretty and typical. Inside, it is full of frescoes.



The church was built by the Crusaders, who passed through the place in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, and the frescoes were painted at the same time. They had been preserved very well. In some places they had been damaged and repainted with new frescoes in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Thus, the latest frescoes there are from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. And so, it is possible to trace the starting point of El Greco's style to the faces and the colours of these frescoes. He spent his entire childhood in and around the church and its impact on his imagination is obvious. Of course, he studied to draw and to paint as was customary at the time, but later, the paintings of his childhood stirred something in him and gave rise to his new way of painting.

A brilliant artist and architect of whom we know nothing passed through this place together with the Crusaders. This was at the times of the Crusades. It took years for the Crusaders to reach Palestine, the Holy Land, from Europe. On the way they stopped for months on end and built small churches. The humankind is lucky that the talent of El Greco had been born there.

Since I have already touched upon the emergence of an individual artist's style, I will recount another lucky occurrence.

During one of our visits to Paris, there was an exhibition of a special group of works by Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Claude Monet. This was a "reconstruction" of their exhibition held in 1887-1888. Van Gogh visited that exhibition and was absolutely amazed by the new style

that he saw in the works by Renoir and Monet. Since that time, all Van Gogh's works had been painted in this style, which he developed further. This is the Van Gogh's style that we are familiar with. He painted in this style during the last two years of his life. Renoir and Monet never used this style again after the exhibition. Indeed, this style was not in sync with the state of mind of these two individuals. Renoir and Monet were quiet people, who wanted to be always in a good mood. However, it perfectly suited Van Gogh with his stormy and restless nature.

We can thank them both for creating the Van Gogh's style.

I would like to move on to the emergence of what we today call the abstract painting style, to the Russian avant-garde. Wassily Kandinsky describes the following anecdote. Back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, long before he became a professional artist, he walked around an art museum in London. Suddenly, he saw a painting by Claude Monet that contained only colours, no objects, just a remarkably beautiful distribution of colours! He was amazed by the artist's courage. For a long time, he simply stood there admiring the work. But then a beam of sunlight moved and suddenly he saw that it was a haystack (we know that Monet loved to paint haystacks and had many such paintings). Kandinsky was really disappointed. He had carried this memory with him for 17 or 18 years. His own paintings had undergone a significant transformation during this time. They contained fewer and fewer real objects, and these objects became less and less distinct, turning into figures with no exact shapes. And then, finally, he made a decision to stop hiding and painted an abstract painting appropriately calling it *The First Abstract Watercolour*. This was in the year 1910 and it marked the beginning of the abstract period in art. Apparently, many artists had been ready for this because several clearly abstract works appeared immediately after that, already in 1911. Thus began the period of exploring the colour in its pure form, unaided by objects. If you have a poor understanding of the beauty behind it, look for sunsets in the evenings. I watch them every evening from my window. Sometimes, it is just a strip on the horizon, but at other times, half of the sky is coloured red-orange. I always admire the view, and each time it is different and interesting in a new way.

At the same time, other artists began exploring colourless shapes or specific objects of daily use (for example, the famous Black Square by Kazimir Malevich).

I think that this new understanding of colour also affects the way the artists paint large canvasses today. Once I watched Jan painting my family (Ludmila, our oldest daughter Larisa and me) on a large canvass. I think it was in 1975. We sat for him for three sessions; each session lasted for about an hour. After the first session, there were only colours on the canvass. Arguably, it was an abstract painting: just a dispersion of colours throughout the canvas with no shapes, not even a trace of a shape (this is a well-known technique: spots of colour are applied to the canvass to begin with).

I was truly amazed. The Renaissance artists used to make sketches of their paintings with pencil in order to see what will appear later on. After the second session we were able to see all the shapes. That is, it was already similar to the Kandinsky's paintings before he transitioned to complete abstraction. There were colours and shapes, it was already clear that there would be three persons on the canvas and how they would be positioned, but there were no details of faces yet. And finally, after the third session the excellent painting was finished. It was realistic in the 20<sup>th</sup> century sense, with recognizable people.

The period of new exploration and new vision has begun. But this would be a topic for a separate book. I am just an amateur, a consumer of what has come out of it.

April 2020, in the midst of COVID19 epidemic.



Panoramic shot of our salon made by Mikhail Shultz in 2019

## About the artist Lydia Mandel,

her circle, Vera Rochlina, Katya Granoff and some other even more well known personalities

I met Lydia Mandel in Paris in the summer of 1975. The memory of our friendship will remain with me forever because of its wonderful beginning and an unbelievably sad end.

In the summer of 1973 we immigrated to Israel from Soviet Union. When I say “we” I refer to myself (a math professor), my wife Lyudmila and our daughter Larisa. Immediately after coming to Israel I began teaching in the Mathematics Department of Tel-Aviv University. In the summer of 1975 all of us set out for Europe (I was supposed to attend several professional conferences, while my family wanted to see Europe). We took our car on a boat to Greece and drove to Paris from there. We were fortunate to have a large vehicle, a Mercedes. It had nothing to do with wealth: at that time in Israel new immigrants could buy cars tax free. Besides, I was quite lucky – but this is another story altogether.

And so we reached Paris. We used to stay in motels because we did not have money for hotels. In Paris we arranged to meet Valya Shapiro, a young artist who like me immigrated to Israel from Moscow, and after some time moved to Paris in search of success and happiness. I believe that she was about 25 years old at that time (I was 35). She was a wonderful artist but had a very difficult life. At the same time, she was quite pushy and already managed to acquire some connections in Parisian artistic circles. For example, she knew Katya Granoff (1895-1989) and she took my family and me to her gallery to meet her.

Katya Granoff

Katya Granoff came to Paris from Russia as a young girl together with her sister. It happened before the Russian revolution. She was a poet and presented us with a collection of her poems. But it was her amazing taste for art that made her famous and rich. She understood and sensed art profoundly and was able to discover young artists and their works. In the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century she helped young Russian painters who at that time came in droves to Paris, this artistic Mecca of late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup>

century. I am not familiar with all details of her biography, but during our meeting in 1975 she told me one small story.

One summer (I don't know what year it was, but it can be easily found out), just prior to their traditional summer vacation in the southern French city of Nice, the sisters attended a new exhibition of young artists' works. Katya loved the paintings of one of the artists and decided to buy two of them. Her sister tried to reason with her: "Katya, this is the money that we need for our vacation". "Then we are not going", came the reply. She bought two pieces. This young painter was none other than Raoul Dufy! Her deep understanding and uncanny taste for art helped her to grow her business, and as of the time of our meeting she owned two galleries in Paris (one near the Presidential Palace in Champs-Elysees and the other one not far from the present day D'Orsay Museum). Besides, she owned galleries all over France (we came across one of them in Honfleur in Normandy).

Katya Granoff made quite an impression upon us. She was very stout and sat in her armchair, while several young women who worked for her were fussing around taking orders. Our visit had a certain purpose: Katya wanted to help Valya Shapiro (she still used to help young artists). The idea was that she would call her old artistic friends and ask them to give Valya old canvasses that they were not going to use anymore. Thus, Valya would get something to paint on for free. Of course, all of them featured some incomplete (and sometimes even finished) work, and Valya was supposed to paint over it. Cruel, isn't it?

Lydia Mandel was one of those friends. She immediately responded and invited Valya to come over. We took our car and drove there, while my wife and daughter stayed at Valya's and prepared lunch.

## Lydia Mandel

Lydia Mandel lived in one of those tall Parisian apartment buildings, somewhere near the Eifel Tower. I believe that we met with her in the building courtyard, but maybe we actually went up to her apartment and then came down to the courtyard together. All those buildings have entrances to the catacombs. The access of course is blocked somewhere at a deeper level, but at the upper level there are cellars divided into small

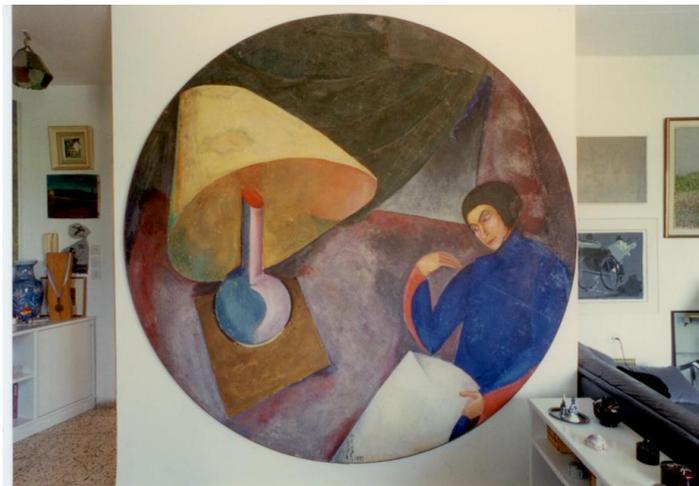
storage rooms, each belonging to one of the apartments. Lydia Mandel also owned a storage room. She held the key in her hand, but was reluctant to go. She was a slim old woman, very communicative and friendly, and she said to me directly: "I am afraid of going there". I was surprised and asked her why. She replied that she had not been there for 40 years(!). Sometime in mid-1930s she left for England with her husband (maybe to exhibit her works or due to her husband's business – she did not specify). The war broke out and they were unable to come back. During those years she lost her husband and later remarried to an Englishman. In any event, she came back years after the war and always delayed going down to the storage room because of the difficult memories. But now, since Katya Granoff asked her to look for old canvasses, she was prepared to go there. I tried unobtrusively to persuade her into going down and promised to be at her side. She agreed (actually, when she went down to the courtyard with us she already resolved to do so). She told us that she did not know exactly what was in the storage room because during the war, when she was in England, her housekeeper used to put there anything that she thought was worth preserving.

We opened the room, and the first thing that we noticed was a thick layer of dust mixed with rot. Nothing could be seen behind them. I lowered my hand into the dust and felt a chair leg. It was curved and probably beautiful, but before I could do anything it just crumbled under my hand. However it is not for nothing that people say that manuscripts do not burn and the art does not crumble! We began retrieving from under the dust old crumpled canvasses and numerous sketch notepads. The notepads had years written on them: 1921, 1920 and 1919 (the year when Lydia came to Paris). I did not inquire, but I think that she drew the sketches in Leger's studio. The style quite resembled Leger's and she knew him well.

Below are two drawing from Mandel notepads from 1920-1922.



It was in this cellar that I found a huge round painting from 1923. It was damaged, but my close friend, a famous Israeli artist Yan Rauchwerger, restored it for me and today it hangs in my house.



Yan also helped me with a Vera Rochlina's painting that I also found under the dust. He carefully set it on an easel and told me to sprinkle it with water for several days while pulling it by breaking pegs behind the easel.

It is a well known technique, but I was not familiar with it. The painting was thus completely restored by the early 1980s, and we are still enjoying it today.



Vera Rockline (Schlezinger, 1896 - 1934)

By the way, when I pulled it from the dust Lydia immediately said: “This is Verochka Rochlina”. As I never heard this name before, she added: “Her husband was...” and she uttered the name of a very famous Russian avant-garde painter. I was sure that I would never forget it. However, I eventually remembered the name Rochlina because I knew well the great mathematician Rochlin from Leningrad and the name stayed with me, while her husband’s name somehow slipped from my memory. Rochlina was completely forgotten by 1970s, and became famous again only in 2000s. Therefore, I thought that it would not be too hard to find out who was her husband in 1930s, just before her suicide. However, I was wrong. There must be some mystery behind it all. Lydia could not be mistaken as Vera was her closest friend, but none of Vera Rochlina’s biographies mentions her second husband. Of course, it is possible that they were not married officially.

We found quite a few interesting works in the cellar. Valya took many canvasses (I felt sorry for each and every one of them). I might have reimbursed her for the price of the canvasses in compensation for the paintings that I took with me.

Next day we set out for UK to attend a conference, and when we came back to Paris the following week, I decided to phone Lydia to thank her once again. It was obvious that she was pleased to hear from me and invited us to come over. This time I came with my family but without Valya. It was an amazing evening, and I will relate some of the stories that she told us below. Her husband did not speak Russian, and after greeting us departed to another room. I never saw him again (although I did speak to him several years later).

When we entered the house, Lydia asked me to return one of the paintings that we found in the cellar. It was a blue painting covered in dust and mud. I must say that my wife and I thought that it might be a Dufy, but nothing definite could be said because of the dust. I intended to clean and restore it once I am back in Israel. It was clear that Lydia was quite nervous about it. She told us that a friend of hers reminded her that in the beginning of 1930s she actually gave her this painting as a present and now she finally would like to have it. Of course, I told her right away that the painting was in my car's trunk and that I would bring it back immediately. My wife and I did not believe her story about the friend and decided that we were right about Dufy. To Lydia's relief I brought the painting to her. She then took her own painting (a girl in a black hat) from the wall and asked: "What you like to have my girl instead?" We, of course, were happy to oblige.



L. Mandel, oil



L. Mandel, drawing from notepads, 20-th

## Stories told to us by Lydia Mandel

## Mayakovski

Mandel was very friendly with Vladimir Mayakovski. Her nephew once wrote to her from Moscow that he saw a photo of two of them in Mayakovski's Museum.

Once, Mayakovski came to Paris and of course met with Mandel. They walked along the Champs-Élysées and Mayakovski suggested having coffee in one of the cafes. Lydia remarked that this was a very expensive place and that they better go somewhere else – there were plenty of cafes around and the coffee was the same everywhere. But Mayakovski insisted. “I have the money”, he said proudly. When the time had come to pay, Mayakovski handed the waiter a 100-frank bill. At that time, it was a huge sum. The waiter took the bill and left. Mayakovski went pale in the face: in Russia waiters would return the change on the spot without departing with the money. Mandel understood that Mayakovski thought that their coffee cost 100 francs. She decided to tease him and not to dispel his fears and continued chatting nonchalantly. In Paris, waiters do not hurry to bring the change back and usually allow the customers to continue with their conversation for some time. All this time Mandel watched Mayakovski and laughed to herself. Only when the waiter came back with the money, the color returned to Mayakovski's face.

## Picasso and Leger

Mandel was surprised that we knew the art of Russian avant-garde well and were familiar with the names of many artists who used to be her friends or acquaintances. Prior to coming to France in 1919 she studied with Ilya Mashkov. In Paris she was especially close to Rochlina (until her death in 1933) and to Robert (1885-1941) and Sonia (1885-1979) Delaunay. Robert Delaunay died quite young, but Sonia was still alive at the time of our conversation. She actually outlived Mandel though she was much older.

I do not remember the stories that she told us about an extremely pushy Sonia. It was a usual tale of someone who tries hard to promote her husband's career (and herself). However, our chat brought us closer. At some point, we touched upon Picasso. I allowed myself to criticize gently his approach to art. Needless to say, Picasso was a great master

who possessed astonishing taste, technique and productivity. But I am a scientist, and for me the question of primacy and authorship of ideas and discoveries is important. I have no doubt whatsoever that Picasso borrowed all his main ideas and discoveries from other artists. Among tens or hundreds of styles that he used I know only one style that in my opinion was truly his own, a fruit of his labor and soul. I told her that as gently as I could trying not to spell out the words of sacrilege. And... to my amazement she agreed with me! I had an impression that she too was afraid of uttering these words, but she told me the following story.

Once during 1920s, she was in a café with Picasso and Leger. Picasso asked Leger when for the last time he walked around Montparnasse. "A very long time ago", answered Leger. "With my school, students and work I don't have much time to hang around". "You are wrong", replied Picasso. "Yesterday, I went on a stroll there, and there were plenty of ideas that you can pick up."

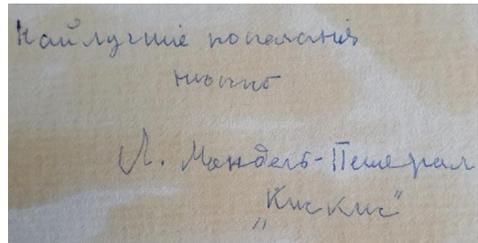
Mandel added that she was shocked. It was clear that he would quickly paint tens of works in the styles that he "picked up" and thus destroy these young artists who had not acquired reputation as yet. She remembered this story after 50 years and shared it with me.

Let me now leave Mandel for a moment and get back to Picasso. Many years later, the Picasso Museum was opened in Paris. There, his personal collection that was kept at his house was put on display for the first time. Among these works, there were no blue or pink paintings or paintings in other styles that he was famous for. What he set aside for himself were works executed in just one style, the same one that I described as his own during my conversation with Mandel.



Picasso, 1921

Besides artists we also talked about other cultural figures. At some point it became clear that she never heard of Bulgakov. His fame had yet to reach France. I promised to send her Master and Margarita and did so once I came back to Israel. She was thrilled and in return sent us a New Year greeting card that she painted by hand.



That was the end of my personal communication with Lydia Mandel. In parting, I will give another drawing of her. I have hundreds of them, and the choice is random, just what I have photographed:



I came back to Paris after two years, in 1978. I phoned Mandel and her husband told me that Lydia had died. She was run over by a car in Nice where they spent their vacation the previous summer. She was in hospital for quite a long time and even painted there a picture for him. She

was buried in Nice. I was upset to such extent that I could barely speak. Later, I called him again and asked if I could see her paintings and buy some of them. He remembered me from my previous visit but told me that he did not have her works anymore. I found this explanation odd and thought that I probably misunderstood him due to language problems. I then asked a mathematician friend of mine, Gilles Pisier, to call Mandel's husband once more, explain to him that my English wasn't good enough and inquire about the paintings. In fact, I simply misunderstood the French realities. Apparently, Mandel signed a life care contract with someone (which is quite a common thing in France). This person paid Lydia a fixed sum of money as long as she was alive in exchange for receiving her apartment after her death. Lydia's husband was given one week to vacate the apartment. The new owner treated him well and let him live in a small room for servants for the rest of his life. However, he had to get rid of all her paintings (I think that he never understood what a wonderful artist she was). He called several galleries but the answers were not promising: "No one remembers Lydia Mandel today" or "We'll call London, maybe someone is interested there" (they apparently just tried to bring down the price). However, Lydia's husband could not wait. He loaded all her paintings into a car and took them to the artists' market on Montparnasse. He was "lucky", as he explained to me on the phone: someone passed by, saw the paintings and bought all of them. The paintings were numerous. I remember that they were all over the apartment, not just on the walls. This person probably knew art and could not believe his luck. I think that her husband sold them cheap. Next day he began receiving calls from galleries that were interested in her works and were shocked to find out that they missed out on them.

I wept when I heard this story.

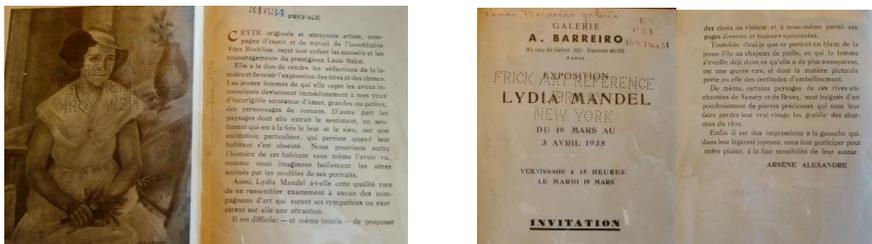
*Afterword.* Mandel notebooks with drawings that we found in her pantry, soaked in dust for forty years. And the paper was very fragile. For years, I carefully leafed through them and blew dust off them. As a result, they took a more normal look. I disbanded some notebooks and put pictures in albums. So I keep them.

All the artists who visited me and saw these notebooks gave them a very high rating. They were placed above the drawings of many famous avant-garde artists, as well as her, Mandel, friends, for example, Sophia

Delaunay. But Sophia was an incredibly punchy woman, and Mandel was quiet and modest. Unfortunately, not only and not so much talent defines success as its combination with punchy activity that has nothing to do with talent.

Once, the famous artist in Israel and Russia, the artist Grobman saw these drawings from me and offered me an exchange of some of them for his work and the work of a very famous Soviet artist Yakovlev. So I have some good works of Grobman and three good works by Yakovlev in exchange for several of these drawings. I agreed to the exchange not because I preferred Yakovlev or Grobman to Mandel, not. It's just that Grobman was (and is) a very active person, and I hoped that he would do something to make this magnificent artist more famous. My wife and I really love her avant-garde big picture-circle, a gift to us, hanging in our salon, and an oil painting by a woman in a hat. These are the only two Mandel oil paintings we have.

A story that may seem funny. We recently changed the apartment, and we selected a new apartment so that it could hang the Circle of Mandel. It is very big. Its diameter is 2 meters 20 cm. And to find such an apartment was not trivial. We also love all her drawings. We give them to people whom we love very much. So in our circle her name is well known.



These pages are from the invitation to the exhibition Mandel in the year 1935. I found them in the Frick Library - Museum in New York

## Ira Rileeva (Reichwarger) 1951 - 2002



*"I work with soft materials and the materials dictate my work".*

*"Youth, beauty, are cinema concept, I am a sculptress, I deal with shapes. It is nobler. These are not beautiful or ugly women. While I work these are not breasts, but rather lines, shapes. It is an abstraction. The human body is simply the departure point for my work..."*

IRA REICHWARGER

Yes, that was her name and she was a descendant of the famous executed Decembrist.

However, my story is not about her family or ancestry, but about Ira – a great artist and sculptor. She got her surname from her mother, Zoya Rileeva, who was a well-known sculptor as well. She never met her father, but she knew about him – he was Alexi Tatziy, a Ukrainian architect.

In early 1973 she came to Israel with her husband Jan. Jan is also a great artist. He thankfully is still alive, so my story is only about the late Ira. She was a wonderful woman with a tragic life story. Her life tragedy was paradoxically related to her talent.

My wife Lyudmila and I immigrated to Israel in the end of July 1973. Several months later we met Ira and Jan who were visiting Tel-Aviv from the north of Israel, where they had been settled after they arrived at the country. At that time they still had no children. Their daughter Miriam and son Motia were born later. We immediately took a liking to them and remained close friends ever since (that is, we are still friends with Jan, and our friendship with Ira lasted until her premature death).

Of course, our love of art played an important role in this friendship.

During the early period of our lives in Israel we all experienced hardships and were quite poor. I, at least, received a regular salary (I worked as a professor at Tel-Aviv University), but Jan and Ira had only some meagre stipends. Jan was (and still is) a professional artist, who later became one of the best Israeli painters, if not the best of them.

But who would buy works of a young aspiring artist? Very few people have such a deep artistic sense that they are ready to spend money on art for the sake of art. When people buy art they usually think of the money that they give away and of the money that they will possibly make in the future. Therefore, it was very hard for the young family to live off their art. I was able to buy some of it with my small salary. Today it is difficult to imagine that I barely managed to scrape up 250 dollars to buy an oil painting called Books, that several decades later was part of a huge exhibition in The Israel Museum (the main art museum in Jerusalem) celebrating the 25 years of Jan's activity in Israel.

But my story is about Ira. And at that time Ira was "not allowed" to paint. This "ban" rightly seems weird. What actually happened was that both Jan and Ira were students of the great Russian painter Vladimir Weisberg. When they got married, their teacher told them that husband and wife cannot both be artists because someone needs to provide for the family, and art does not pay bills. Therefore, he told them, Jan should continue studying art because he already was a mature painter, but Ira, who was then just in the beginning of her career, would find something else to do.

### Ira as a sculptor ('soft sculpture')

The teacher's opinion was almost sacred to his students and Ira believed that she had no right to paint. Therefore, when she came to Israel she was looking for some alternative occupation.

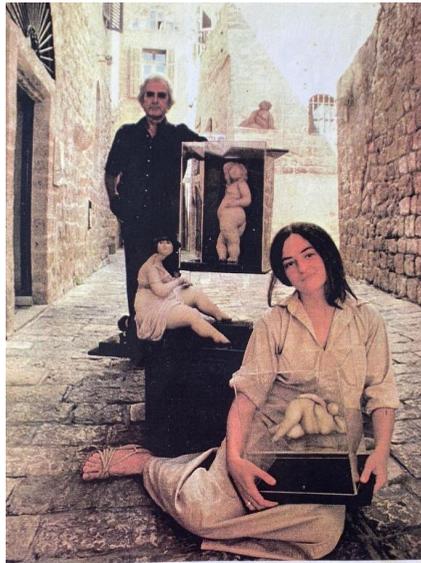
However, her talent prevailed, and in the middle of this forced idleness she began making stuffed wool dolls. Nylon stocking were used as a frame. And it was a miracle! She even managed to create portraits. We were able to identify the subjects, despite their somewhat cartoonish depiction. My wife Luda collected old nylon stockings from all her friends, and Ira created a true art.



Tzvi Noam, a gallery owner who worked with Jan, saw this beauty, set up a special exhibition of Ira's art and presented all dolls that Ira had completed up to that time. Many of the dolls depicted prostitutes that used to stroll along the seaside Yarkon street in the evening. Ira would come there alone and hang around in some hallway, watching and drawing the strolling prostitutes. And then she would come home and make dolls. I think that was the beginning of the art of 'soft sculpture'.



So, Noam exhibited Ira's works in his gallery. And then something completely unexpected happened. The gallery was full of her works, and the first visitor who entered the exhibition hall came up to Zvi and told him that he wanted to buy all of them. This was quite sensational, and made headlines. The exhibition continued as planned, but when it was over, all exhibits went to this person. His name was Mr. Richter, and he was an important gallery owner as well. He had a well-known and professional gallery in Old Jaffa.



Mr. Richter with Ira and her dolls. Jaffa, Photo by Arnold Newman

I will digress for a moment. Many years later, my friend Fima who is a famous artist as well, told me what really happened there. He too was a friend of Jan and Ira, and saw Ira's dolls. Before the exhibition opened, he told Richter: "Go and see the dolls, they are a work of a genius". Richter was quite rich: every year his wealthy parents sent him a large allowance from America. I even heard that he got one million dollars a year, but that was probably an exaggeration. And he loved Ira's dolls, which unfortunately proved to be a very bad thing for her. He signed a contract with her, and she undertook to provide him with two dolls per month at a fixed price. He was also entitled to buy all dolls that she made. The price was not high, but it was a regular income, and Ira was happy. However, the problem was not that otherwise she probably could have earned ten times more selling her dolls at the free market.

The real trouble was that he loved those dolls so much that he refused to sell them. The country heard about them, knew about them, but they were not on the market. I still have a doll that she gave us as a present; it was one of her very first dolls, from the time before the story that I told above.



Our doll, A Female Singer with a Surprise

I will now tell three brief anecdotes from that time that will show the level of Ira's popularity.

There is a famous Israeli journalist, Yaron London. He still has his own one-hour TV program. At that time he was extremely popular and considered a highly intelligent and intellectual TV personality. He had a very popular half-hour show every week, and he dedicated one of them entirely to Ira. The dolls, Ira and Yaron London were brilliant and the show was well received.

Short time after the show was aired (it probably was in 1976) I was supposed to fly to New York City. Ira's maternal half-brother lived there and she asked me to take one of the dolls to him as a present. Of course, I could not send it with the luggage, so I took it with me as a carry-on. The

doll was in a glass case wrapped in cloth. Obviously, a woman who conducted the security check asked me to unwrap it. She saw the doll and shouted to other security officers: "Look, Ira, Ira!" All security people came to look at the doll. And I was treated like a VIP!

The third story happened in the spring of 1979.

I was on sabbatical leave with my family in Albany, the capital of New York State. In NYC there was at that time an arts and crafts fair. A huge hall in a huge building was partitioned into small rooms (actually, cells), and each one of them was allocated to a certain gallery.

Galleries from all over the world with the exception of American galleries were represented there. There were cells full of Chagall's works and cells full of works of other famous painters and sculptors.

But the cell where Richter exhibited Ira's dolls was by far the most popular. It was an unimaginable success. I think that it was actually the first time when 'soft sculpture' as a branch of art was shown in NYC.

Ira and Jan did not speak English and did not understand what was going on, but I witnessed the following conversation. A woman approached Richter and said to him: "I represent Los Angeles (or, maybe, it was San Francisco). I want to buy these dolls". "They are sold out for the next two years", replied Richter. The woman said, "OK, I'll wait, just put me on the waiting list".

The tragedy was that it was all lies. Richter did not want to sell anything and he actually clipped Ira's wings. Ira saw this, understood what was happening and was very upset about it.

Sometime in mid-1980s the famous Israeli author Ephraim Kishon also became interested in Ira's dolls. His wife Sara Kishon owned a gallery, and they began regularly buying them. The connection with Richter stopped being exclusive. Ephraim Kishon lived most of the time in Switzerland, and the majority of Ira's dolls were sent there. However, Sara's gallery was in Israel and she sold some of the dolls. They paid Ira more than Richter paid her, and although they too loved her dolls and kept most of them, they still sold some of them.

More than 30 years later, when both Ira and Richter were long gone, Jan was preparing an exhibition of Ira's dolls in the Ein Harod Kibbutz Museum. While working on it he found the entire collection of her dolls in a dusty warehouse that used to belong to Richter, but at that time was owned by someone else. He managed to restore some of them, but others were lost. Richter did not sell any of them!

Dolls that are kept by Kishon's heirs are not in a good condition as well. Of course, one may think that wool dolls cannot last long. This

is not true. I have two Ira's dolls and even now, 45 years after she gave them to me, they are in a perfect condition. I keep them in a glass case and they look exactly as they looked when we got them. I never had to repair them, while I had to send for restoration some of the paintings that I own, although they are considerably newer than the dolls.

Here are some other works from this period



A Wedding (1975), The Israel Museum (photo by Nachum Slepak)

I would like to add more pictures from this period, but I better stop here and show a picture from mid-1980s when Ira preferred working with big life-size figures.

Three Graces (1985), from the collection of Aviva and Arieh Sarnat, Tel Aviv



In between, Ira had another amazing success.



Together with a fashion designer Tamara Yovel-Jones, she created a special exhibition of human-size dolls (made by Ira) that were dressed in clothes especially designed by Tamara Yovel-Jones.

The exhibition took place in the 13 ½ Gallery in Old Jaffa in 1982. The attendance was free, but there was a long line at the entrance. We joked that it reminded us of the queue to Lenin's mausoleum in Moscow. The US Ambassador Samuel W. Lewis visited 3 times in one month. He took there all of his guests and each time wrote about his admiration in the visitors' book.

From the 13 ½ Gallery the exhibition moved to The Israel Museum in Jerusalem where it also had an enormous success.

I remember a funny story about it.

It shows the wonderful sense of humour that Ira had. Her humour always had an optimistic quality to it, even when Ira was depressed (I will write about it more below). One day, months after the Jerusalem exhibition was closed, we came to see Ira and Jan. Ira was happy and in a very good mood. She told us that she just received 5,000 dollars from The Israel Museum. "Why?" I asked her.

"When my dolls' exhibition in Jerusalem was over, they did not bring the dolls back, but put them in storage. And now they are telling me that one of the security personnel had sex with one of the dolls. The doll was damaged, and they are paying me the insurance", said Ira. "But I can't understand what was it that he didn't like about the other dolls", she added.

This is a great sense of humour, but also quite sad. Ira and Jan at that time had very little money, and 5,000 dollars was a huge sum for them.

I must say that by mid-1980s Ira's interest in 'soft sculpture' was waning. She was now more interested in painting, although from time to time she went back to dolls.

Here is a sculpture group called Jan's Family that Ira created in 1990s. It was a birthday present for Jan. You can see there Jan's family as it was at this point in time: Jan, his wife Galit, their small children Daniel and Nadav as well as their dog.

You can easily recognize each one of them!



## Depression

Depression comes after success. Severe depression comes after a big success.

Maybe there is a chemical substance released by our body that acts like an addictive substance. We, scientists, are also familiar with it. There is a very long preliminary period of work and study before the result is achieved. During this period we become workaholics. We are simply not able not to work and can overcome the depression with hard work. Maybe, the same happens with some artists too, but for other artists it is different: they are extremely talented people for whom success comes too early. In that case, a tragedy may strike and not everyone will find strength to overcome it. Frequently, they begin to drink.

That is what happened to Ira. Only someone who never came close to a big success can claim that something like that won't happen to him. Of course, there were some people, 'friends', who helped her drink and prevented her from kicking the habit. I don't want to give their names here because they do not deserve to be mentioned (they usually drank at Ira's expense). Ira became an alcoholic. Jan did everything in his power to help her become sober. Sometimes it looked like he succeeded, but in the end she always relapsed. At some point, he couldn't take it anymore and they divorced. I think that Ira probably wanted it.

During all that time Ira continued drawing, painting and sometimes

even made dolls. I will write more about Ira as a painter below, but here I just want to note that her friends organized sales of her works in her huge house in Old Jaffa to raise funds for her. My wife and I frequently visited her and always bought her works. She used to spread her drawings, oil paintings and watercolours on the floor and say "Please choose". I wanted to buy all of them, but my wife Lyudmila usually said: "Where are we going to hang them? Our house is full of art". And we actually stacked them like in a warehouse. We really did not have enough room for them. I usually said to my wife "We will give them to..." and names followed.

Indeed, all my friends have Ira's paintings that I gave them as a present.

She charged very little for them, and I tried to supplement her income by buying as many of them as I could. Do not think that I used her - she simply refused to charge more. She used to say that they didn't cost much. Maybe she referred to the effort that she invested in creating them.

True, sometimes those were just quick sketches, but they were amazing. I felt bad about each work that I didn't buy. I was greedy, I wanted to have all of them (of course, the prices were affordable).

Later, when Luda and I visited friends who had many works of art hanging on the walls, we would sometimes note a very special one and say to each other: "What a wonderful painting". And when we came closer, we invariably saw that it was painted by Ira. Today her works are in Paris, in Princeton, in Belgium and in Russia.

Unfortunately, we did not see Ira for almost a year before her death.

The ceilings in her house were more than 5 meters high. She built a loft area and set up her bedroom there. To reach the bedroom you had to climb almost vertical stairs. Ira fell, hit her head and died. She was just 50. Her mother found her in the morning under the stairs. She still had a bottle of brandy in her hand.

20 years have passed and I still shiver when I think about it.

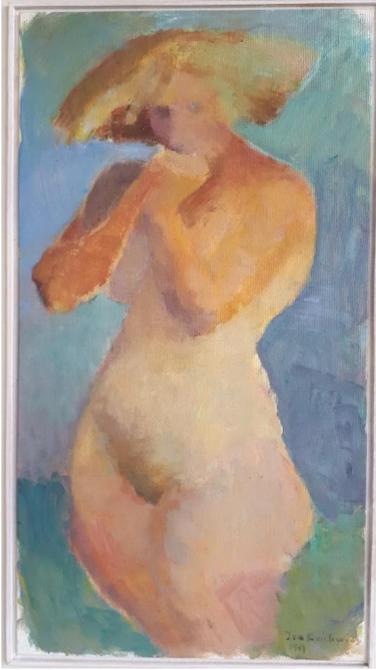
## Ira as a painter

Of course, the teacher's "ban" on painting, on becoming a painter did not stop Ira. Already in 1973-1974, when she was working on her dolls, she sketched the women while hiding in Yarkon street hallways. These sketches are true works of art.

Later she started drawing them professionally, not just sketching to make dolls. The goal was already the drawings, not dolls.



Then she turned to watercolours and to oil paintings.



Her paintings had amazing sensuality in them; they really touched your heart. Her lines and forms were also very strong. It happens sometimes that you are emotionally attached to an artist's works, you want to look at them and sense them. That is what happened to me with Ira's art. But she rarely painted with oil; watercolours and gouache were her primary media.



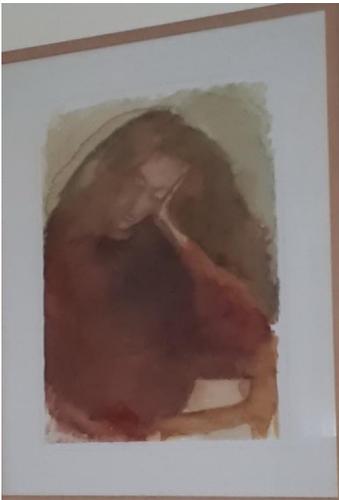
She had many dogs and used to sketch them too.



Her watercolour portrait of her daughter Miriam (below) is a true masterpiece. It hangs on a wall in our house, and Miriam looks completely alive.

Very few artists are able to create a watercolour portrait that will display the shadows, and everything just like an oil painting. Her teacher Weisberg was of course able to do so.

It is difficult to express this in words, so I will better show the paintings.



## Afterword

Maybe 5 or 6 years after Ira's death, my wife and I dropped into a gallery in Gordon Street.

The owner knew us. Maybe, once we even bought a picture from him. We asked him about an oil painting by Fima. He did not have it, and just out of curiosity I asked him if he had anything by Ira. He replied: "Come on, if someone has an Ira, do you really think he is going to sell it?" And then I realized what I already knew by then: everyone loves Ira's art so much that they are simply unable to sell it.

This is the misfortune of talent!



Sleeping Ira, a work by Jan Rauchwerger, early 1980s.

MARCH, 2020

## Greece

We often visited Greece and spent a lot of time there.

One of my students, Tony Tsolomitis, is a professor at the university on the island of Samos, and we wrote a book together with him; one of the professors of the University of Athens, Apostolos Giannopoulos, my very close colleague and co-author. We wrote a lot of papers with him, and our

second joint book is coming out this year. I know very well many other mathematicians in Greece.

But my story is not about my scientific connections. I will talk about the three islands of Greece, which for various reasons made a huge impression on me.

These are Crete, Santorini and Samos.

I selected Crete and Santorini because of the connection with art, which I am going to talk about. Samos does not have this connection. But Pythagoras was born there, and we will discuss another type of unusual phenomenon associated with this place.

## Crete

We visited Crete many times and once spent two months on it. The reasons were always scientific. However, of course, we traveled to Crete and visited its attractions. Several places were especially interesting to me. For example, the cave of Zeus. It is located at an altitude of 2.5 km and it is difficult to get to it even today. Since our first visit to this cave, a well-paved road has been brought up to about a kilometer or two to the entrance to the cave. But the last kilometer is difficult, at least it was difficult for me in my 65 years.

Legend says that in this cave Zeus was hiding from the wrath of his father after he was born and then during the time he was young. But the interest for me was that there is an accurate record of the famous pilgrims who visited the cave in ancient Greece. And among them there is Pythagoras. The entrance area is very small, half a meter wide. Laugh at me, but I felt satisfied standing in the same place where Pythagoras stood. Exactly in the same place.

I already wrote about our visit to the place where El Greco was born.

We were also very proud that we managed to cross Crete from the North point to the sea on the South side, 23 km, I think. Of course, it was a special tourist route. But those who passed it were given a special certificate. (Again, we were over 60).

Crete is the place of the Minoans civilization. This civilization was fatally damaged during a volcano explosion on the island of Santorini 3600 years ago. Perhaps the main center of this civilization was just in Santorini. I

will talk about Santorini later. The incredible tsunami passed 110 km to Crete and washed away everything in the north of Crete, including the fortress-castle Knossos. For comparison, about a hundred years ago, there was an explosion of an island volcano in Indonesia, the volcano Krakatau. They say that the sound of the explosion went around the earth, like the tsunami that it caused. Subsequently, ships, ocean ships, were found in the forest almost in the center of the island. The earth fell there 70 meters under water. So, in Santorini, the Earth fell 200 meters. But I'll talk about Santorini later.

Knossos is the legendary Labyrinth of the ancient world. The museum of Heraklion, the capital of Crete, which is located just a few kilometers from Knossos, is full of incredibly elegant and beautiful in every sense everyday things of this ancient civilization. Some of them would sell out today as modern wonderfully made things. Before your eyes are, for example, cups of coffee. I don't know what they were for, but I would use them as the best coffee cups I've seen.

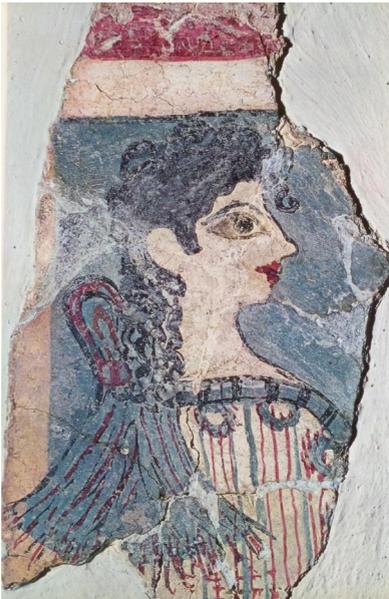
I can't show you them and this is due to the specific rules of archeology in all of Greece. The laws of Greece determine that all ancient artifacts must be preserved in the museums of the place where they are found. Crete is full of unusual and wonderful artifacts. And each small town of Crete has its own museum full of very good and interesting exhibits. These are what they found in its vicinity. Since the capital of Crete, Heraklion is located near Knossos, the Archaeological Museum of this city is overcrowded.

Taking pictures inside it is forbidden before registering new finds in books that you can buy. However, books on finds are, I think, decades behind. So we could only lick our lips looking at wonderful things.

A few years after I saw these wonderful coffee cups, we were in this museum again. But these cups were not on display and they were not in the books. The first time these were new finds, and maybe only now, 20 years later, they will find their way into their books. I could draw them.

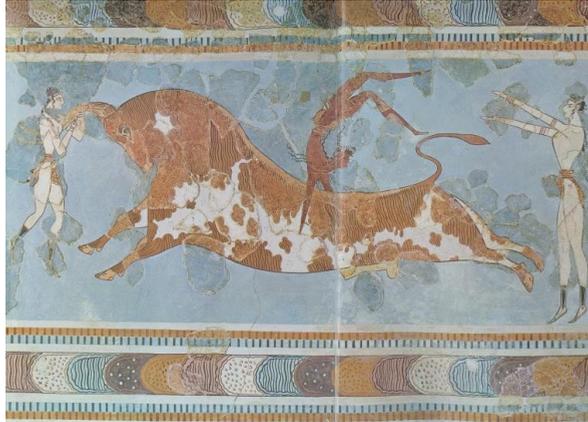
The period also includes paintings that can be seen in Knossos. They are interesting and advanced, but there are also some less impressive ones. (Therefore, I think, that Santorini, which is considered the disappeared Atlanta, which will be discussed later, was the center of culture, not Crete).

Although on the other hand, some of them are impressive to a state of complete ecstasy. Here is one example. We are talking about the period before the explosion of the volcano, about 3.600 years ago. Pay attention to the graceful clothes and the woman's face. It was a different race. She does not look like any people of the Mediterranean, we know today. Other female faces found in Santorini that I placed next to the photo are of the same type. And the fashion of clothes, hairstyles, well-groomed faces, wouldn't this be suitable for modern fashion and women?



After the fatal blow of the tsunami, civilization catastrophically went down. For some time after the disaster, the archeology of these places simply does not find anything. Wild tribes that arrived from the North (Greeks?) Gradually forced out the remnants of the Minean civilization to the south of the island. And after 500 years, no trace of it was left.

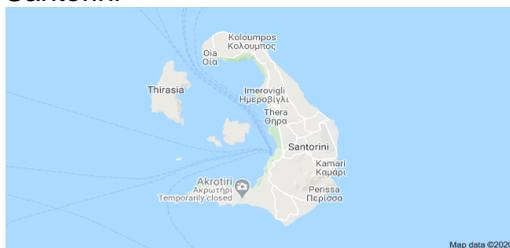
I show below another fresco from Knossos. Pay attention to the strength of these lines, to the circus performer on the back of this horse. This is not at all Egyptian or Babylonian culture.



The tribes who came (sailed) from the North found traces and things of a departed civilization in the land. And they began to copy them. And also change, convert. A new culture grew on this ground. Somewhere in the eighth century BC, they already had wonderful examples of their own. It is an amazing time travel to watch this transition.

## Santorini

We visited Santorini only once and for just one day. Early in the morning we left Crete on a ship, sailed to Santorini, stayed all day and returned to Crete. One-way trip lasted about 3 hours. So we could not see much in Santorini



I have given a map of a group of islands that were once an oval island. The largest island, on the right on the map, is the one on which there is a very active life now. There we sailed to the city of Therra. A small island in the center is uninhabited. This is an active volcano today. Another island on the left has a very small population. The explosion of the volcano 3.600 years ago destroyed everything, no trace of life was in the

remaining territory. It took 500, or maybe 1,000 years, until the tribes from the North began to populate it.

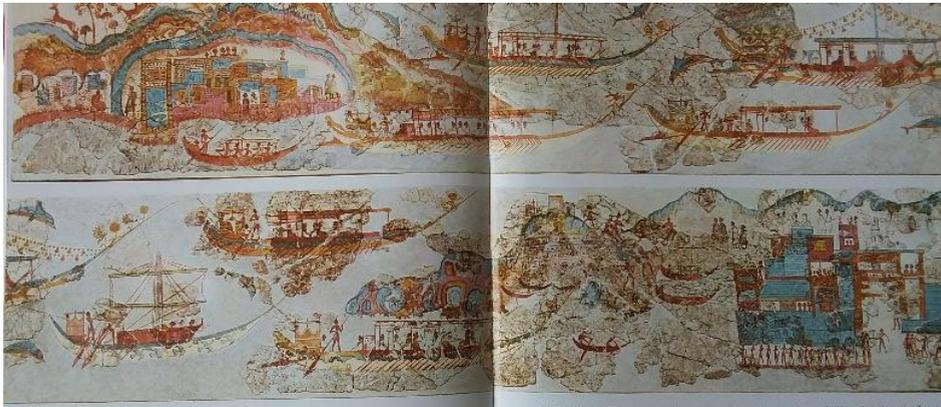
However, no serious archaeological finds were discovered here until the seventies of the last century.

It was believed that the eruption destroyed everything. However, in the mid-seventies in the mountains in the area called Akrotiri, on the southern coast of Santorini, the remains of the apparently mountain residence of the island's Aristocracy began to be found.

Of course, the excavation took decades, and continues today. But in 1997, when we visited Santorini, it was already clear that a historical place had been found, about which Plato wrote, the so-called Atlantis.

We really wanted to take an excursion to the excavation area, but those who wanted to go on this excursion turned out to be insufficient and it was cancelled. As we will see, this was not a problem for us. The stunning Frescoes, already excavated by then, we saw a year or two later in the main museum of Athens. Exactly these frescoes confirm the hypothesis that Atlantis is found. All that Plato described about the main city of Atlanta is on these frescoes.

Judge for yourself:



These are the most detailed pictures of life. And here is an individual drawing:



I will bring two more frescos to show this incredible level of art.



Do you still remember that we are talking about 1,600 years BC? Every time I have to remind myself of this, because it is incomparable with anything. There are scenes of dolphins and dolphin hunting for fish, scenes of running monkeys and much, much more.

By the way, the fact that we saw all these wonderful frescoes in the Museum of Athens and not in Santorini is not a violation of the rule, which I said before that all the sights of the excavations are stored where they were found. It's just that Santorini did not yet have a museum for all these amazing artifacts when we were there. When a few years later we were again in Athens and visited their main archaeological museum, the original finds from Santorini were no longer there. Only copies. The originals were in Santorini.

I will end with another wonderful story about this civilization.

Excavations showed that some time before the explosion, a very strong earthquake occurred. The interval is estimated in many months, maybe even up to a year. The grass managed to grow on the houses destroyed by the earthquake. But the residents did not rebuild the houses. They realized that the disaster will come. They collected everything valuable and left. There are signs that few people remained, but they left before the explosion. As a result, not a single human skeleton, or even of domestic animals, was found during excavations. With one exception, they found one pig skeleton. Everything is neatly folded, everything valuable is taken.

(Who was in Pompeii, compare. There the whole city was in corpses.)

## Samos

Samos is an island in the Aegean Sea very close to Turkey. It was born there and lived for a long time the famous mathematician of ancient time Pythagoras, and many more great scientists and cultural figures of antiquity. For example, the philosopher Epicurus, astronomers Aristarchos and Conon, Dr. Erasistratos, sculptors Geneleos and the family Rikos and Theodoros, and many others. This is amazing concentration of minds for such a small island (about 20 to 20 km).

One of my former students, Tony Tsolomitis, is a professor of mathematics at the University of Samos. Greece is in many ways an island state, and has very interesting laws related to this. There is also

the University of the Aegean. Its various faculties are scattered across different islands. Naturally, the Faculty of Mathematics located on the island on which Pythagoras was born.

Various legends about Pythagoras one may still hear on Samos. For example, in every gift shop, the so-called Pythagorean cup is sold. It seems to be a fact that Pythagoras was a bartender until his departure from Samos, when he was about 20 years old. (Only 40 years later he returned to Samos). So, as a bartender, Pythagoras came up with a self-service method. He invented such a cup that if a visitor poured himself wine above a special line - a mark, then all the wine from the cup poured out and the visitor received nothing. We also bought such a cup.

Of course, I visited Tony, and even twice, on Samos. By the way, he told me that there were records that the wife of Pythagoras and his daughter were mathematicians. Even the name of one of his wife's works has been preserved, but not the content of this work.

Samos is a very touristic island. But the first time we stopped near the university and the place where Tony lived. As I understood later, it was a lot of luck. We did not have cafes, restaurants or good beaches there, but we found one very interesting phenomenon. The taste of fruits and vegetables was completely unusual. Peaches had such an incredible taste that we never ate anywhere. I mean so good taste. I can't describe it, but I remember it now, 15 years later. My wife also remembers. Different shades of this taste were in everything that grew from this earth, on this soil. Grapes, tomatoes, onions. Everything had this shade, this slightly sweet unusual flavor. Tony told me that they can pluck from their tree olives and eat them. Usually, olives cannot be eaten from a tree. They are incredibly bitter. They are soaked for a very long time before use. But on Samos the picture is different. This taste can be slightly felt in sweet wine with Samos. And some French wine company bought many tons of their grapes to mix it with their wine. This was the first time in the year that I was there. But something happened, and all purchased grapes overwaited (and soured). I don't know what happened next year.

This island is of course volcanic, and each volcanic island has its own soil. Eruptions carry out not identical materials.

And there is something special on this island. And I return to the beginning, to that list of immortal geniuses that this island produced. Perhaps the soil has already been depleted and these elements are fewer

now than they were 2000-2500 years ago. I will now explain why I wrote that I was lucky that the first time we did not live in a touristic place. When the second time we stopped already in a very touristic place, and we immediately ran to buy their fruits, we were disappointed. The taste was ordinary, not special, which we remembered. Tony was with us. He laughed. "Where on our small island can there be enough fruits and vegetables for all visiting tourists?" he asked, "All this has been imported from mainland Greece." And in Greek he asked the seller to always give us local products. And the unusual taste was back.

(I joked: If I were young, I would study the agriculture and receive the Nobel Prize for the discovery of this unusual substance, this soil).

Last funny comment about Samos. My Greek friends told me that the surname Pythagoras still exists in Greece, but only on the island of Samos. There is not a single Pythagoras outside Samos. Then I suggested that our mathematical conference, which was held at that time in Samos, invite people with the name Pythagoras to the restaurant. "Vitaly, we cannot, it may be too many of them," they told me. So I have not met any modern Pythagoras. April, 2020.

## Cortona and Signorelli

(Luca Signorelli, 1450- 16 October 1523)



Self portrait

I was first invited to a conference in Cortona in 1995 (June). In the mathematics circle that I knew, no one had heard of conferences in Cortona. Therefore, I even thought that perhaps this was the first conference of mathematicians in this place, although now I know that they have been going on since the eighties. This place is so wonderful that you need to talk about it separately. The legends of its creation date back to Noah, and claim that his son Crano founded the city on a hill in 273 after the Great Flood. Subsequent annals already accurately state this city in the seventh century BC, and it was Etruscans city. But I am interested in “only” the 15th century AD. In this century, the castle in which we lived and in which the conference was held, has acquired its present appearance. And at the same time, wonderful frescoes were painted, among which we walked, and we listened to lectures. First, we will get to know the castle. Cortona is located on a hill about 20 km from the intersection of the roads Rome - Florence and Siena - Assisi. The castle in which the conferences take place is approximately 2 km from the city wall of Cortona. During the Renaissance, the family that inhabited the castle actually owned Cortona. And all the best that was in Cortona is reflected in this castle. For example, the frescoes of the great artist of the time Luca Signorelli. He was born in Cortona and died in this castle



Castle (fortress) Palazzone

In the photo, the entrance to the castle. However, what you see as the second floor is actually the first. And what seems to be the first floor is a

basement on the other side of the castle. Green Gate, this is a place for horses. And the diagonal line from the entrance to the castle territory to the second floor is a staircase and the entrance to the castle for guests.



In the right photo, I show separately the diagonal of the entrance. In the left photo - this is the entrance itself, photographed between two trees. The green door at the top of the stairs is the entrance to the small chapel, and through it into the courtyard. This chapel was painted by Luca Signorelli (also called Luca da Cortona) when he died. So its painting is not finished. He was just painting the ceiling opposite the entrance. I will show now photographs of these places.



The chapel is closed with such a lattice. But we were allowed to go inside and we took a picture of this wall. The following two photographs are exactly what Signorelli painted when he fell and died.



Every day we went through this place several times and the image of Signorelli was always in front of us. Subsequently, in all the museums in which Signorelli was, we always ran to watch it. We joked that he turned into our relative.

And below is the courtyard into which we get from the chapel. This courtyard is closed, the entrance is only through the chapel and in the center we see a well. This window is opposite the entrance.



In the next few photos there is a lecture hall. The only window of this room is located opposite the lecturer. And I was afraid how I would give a lecture in such beauty. But it turned out that this is an ideal location: The lecturer is partially blinded by light, and the paintings do not distract him; However, for the listeners, the light is from behind and the murals are very clearly

visible. So it's never boring, or you listen to a lecturer, and when it's boring, you watch pictures.



In the two photos below, Luda examines the murals, standing near the window. The view from this window in the photo on the right. Pay attention to the door in the distance, actually closed by chairs. As the Russian tale says, this door is “not simple but golden”. Behind it is the apartment of the Countess, whose family owned this entire castle.



Time to tell how we, mathematicians ended up in such a castle.

In 1968, the hereditary owner of the castle and the surrounding area, the Palazzone, Count of Lorenzo Passerini presented it to the Scuola Normale, located in Pisa. The reason for the gift is standard in Europe.

The estate inheritance tax is so incredibly high even for children that even a very wealthy person cannot afford it. There are other laws on the methods of maintaining such islands of the past, under which it is prohibitively expensive to maintain this place. So the owners donate them. Thanks to the authorities, even though they have a choice to whom donate. The Scuola Normale creates this place for conferences and various types of meetings and schools. I think our meeting was one of the very first for mathematicians, thanks to members of our scientific Community, professors Stefano Campi and Aljosa Volcic.

According to the conditions of the donation, the countess could live in this castle until her death. She had a small apartment, a small garden behind him with an independent entrance, and the entrance, which I showed in the photo, was simply not needed.

We had five conferences in this place (in 1995, 1999, 2003, 2007 and 2011). But only for the last time we managed to get the countess's consent to visit her apartment, the walls and ceiling of which were painted by Signorelli and another artist of that time. I think the second artist was Giovan Battista Caporali from Perugia. He painted many rooms of this castle, including, apparently, our lecture hall. He was also a friend of Signorelli. Here are two photos from these rooms.



The left photo is the ceiling, and the right is a small detail, of which there are a lot.

A few additional notes on Signorelli. There is an opinion that Signorelli was a student of [Piero della Francesca](#) in the 1460s, but later the main influence on him was provided by the Pollaiuolo brothers, who invited him to Florence in the 1470s. In 1479, Signorelli was elected to the "Council of 18" in Cortona, and was involved in politics for the rest of his life. His

most famous work is frescoes of the Last Judgment (1499–1503) in Orvieto Cathedral.

I want to say a few more words about the city of Cortona itself. It is miniature but / and very nice. Once we opened television on some program and saw an almost hourly broadcast about Cortona. In a small square in the center, some very important orchestra gave a concert of classical music. There were people on all the steps and streets. How we would like to be among them!

And finally about the Cortona Museum. This tiny town has an amazing art museum. It has a large collection of Signorelli works, which, say, is natural. However, it also has, perhaps, the best work of Fra Angelico, huge, bright, wonderful. (I apologize, I know that Beato Angelico should be said, because he received this Blessing status. But in all European, and not Italian, books are written Fra, that is, brother, monk. And I wrote “fra” so that the reader would know who is in question.).

This painting, The ***Annunciation of Cortona*** is a panel-painting [altarpiece](#) by [Fra Angelico](#), [you may see below](#) :



Afterword. Why did I decide to write about Cortona and Signorelli? Of course, because Signorelli died in this place and all my time in Cortona I was near this place. Similar sentiments act on me. We once visited the

grave of Van Gogh and the room in which he died. The explosion of heavy emotions was very strong. I was accidentally at the grave of Soutine, as well as Poincaré. Strange, but the emotions on the grave of a great artist (always with a tragic fate) and a great scientist are very different.

In contrast, I want to give an example of the emergence of very positive emotions, when the intersection with breathtaking personality was connected with the life of a person and not his death.

I have stayed several times in the room in which Goethe spent several years.

Once I stayed there for a month, but several times for 7 to 10 days. It was in Zurich in a small mansion located between the mathematical departments of Zurich University and ETH. Best location for me. I could attend both departments, because each of them was no more than 100 m walk. In addition, it was very close to the magnificent Zurich Museum of Art and fantastic views of the Lower Town opened from the garden of this house.

This mansion belonged to Zurich University, and as you might guess, it was donated to the university for the same reason that Palazzone in Cortona was donated to Scuola Normale in Italy: the hereditary owners of this mansion did not have the huge money that they had to pay for the inheritance. This mansion had a floor on the ground, and two more floors above it. A floor on the ground was occupied by several university offices, the last, second floor was the Thomas Mann Museum. He also stayed once in this mansion, the owners of which for centuries have been patrons and supported writers. On the first floor there was a large library, a very large room, once a living room, and now there is a room for important meetings (I only once watched such a meeting during all my time there, and this is connected with a rather funny story). Besides this, on this floor there was a kitchen and two guest rooms. I had to live in both of them. I don't know which of these two rooms Goethe lived in, but I divided my time equally between them. Of course, my friend and colleague, a professor at University of Zurich Hans Jarchow, made sure that I settled there. I must say that emotionally it always paid off. I did a lot there. From administrative events, GAFA journal was created there, and the nickname GAFA was coined there.

One last funny story. At the entrance to the mansion were two tablets. One said that the Thomas Mann Museum is in the building, and the other, just under my window, says that Goethe lived in this mansion with the dates when he lived here. One Saturday morning I stood by this open window. A family, a father, a mother and two children fled to this entrance. They saw me in the window and in a hurry asked, "Thomas Mann?" - pointing at somewhere between the door and me. I replied: "No, I am Goethe. Thomas Mann is one floor higher." They stopped for a moment, opened their mouths for surprised, and then laughed.

May, 2020.

## Legends on artists

The talent of a true Artist is one of the rare and wonderful phenomena to which mankind has not yet found true application.

In this part I want to present various stories and legends about great artists. One of my stories in this part almost word to word repeats a piece from my first article. I mean, a story about El Greco, 4d

This will be a selection of well-known or slightly less well-known, but presented in literature events. Perhaps the reason and morale, because of which I selected them differs from the reasons the alluded materials were written. It is also possible that one or two of these stories will be slightly more original. But I hope all of them will be interesting for non-specialists, for amateurs. Of course, I do not know anything that the experts would not know. Forgive me, the experts, this part is not written for you.

### 1. Marc Chagall (1887 - 1985)

(Born Movsha Khatskelevich, subsequently Mark Zaharovich Chagall)

I am not aiming at biography of the artist (the first child in a poor Jewish family, etc.). He really wanted to be an artist from a young age.

On the main street of Vitebsk, the city in which his family lived, there was a sign "The school of painting and drawing by artist Pen". And the boy persuaded his father to give him 5 rubles, which would be enough for

almost 2 months of training. Pen looked at his drawings and decided to take him.

After some time, Mark's mother asked her son (who was then called Movsha) what the teacher had been telling him and what he taught. "Nothing," answered the son. And the indignant mother went to school to talk with the teacher. "Why aren't you explaining anything to my son?" she asked.

"Because I don't want to spoil him," the teacher answered.

Chagall himself told a different story. The end of the paid tuition time was approaching. It was necessary to draw something, and Chagall chose a violet color for the task, which no one used for this purpose. According to Chagall himself, the choice of this colour was an act of arrogance. As Pen glanced at it he said: "you will be studying with me for free for another year", it sounded like a punishment verdict.

Chagall's vision of things was unique. It wasn't only that he looked at things, but things, also, looked at him. And one can see these unexpected heads or just eyes looking at you from flowers and other things in his paintings. They observe you. Not only you study them, but they too study you. His very character was unusual. I had given an example of this in one of my stories in this collection.

Those who collect his art told me that he could not be left alone with his old works. He would start "correcting" them.

Chagall was a very witty man. His book "My Life" is one continuous stream of humor.

Once we saw an exhibition of his drawings (in Paris). The drawings were from his early age in Russia. Every drawing kept something written in Russian by him. Of course, visitors of the exhibition could not understand them. But we could. In one of these drawings was a man standing on his head in bed. And nothing else. But the inscription was: "there is nothing to do." So funny!

This expression enriched my vocabulary. Now, as I'm on something that may look like nonsense (this article, for example), I tease myself: "nothing to do."

2. Paul Cézanne (1839 - 1906)

(Mostly about Cézanne and Zola)

There were three friends in French Provence: Cezanne, who dreamed of becoming an artist, Zola, who dreamed of becoming a writer, and Batista Baille, who dreamed of becoming a scientist-chemist. Each of them had become what he dreamt of. But in a very different way, with much differing fortunes. To become a scientist is “the easiest thing”, there are no crazy twists in fate.

I want to touch on the relationship between very close friends, Paul Cezanne and Emil Zola.

Cezanne's father was a banker, and the family did not need money. But he wanted Cezanne to follow him and become a banker. He told Paul: "Talent destroys, and money feed."

(Perhaps, almost the entire history of painting of the last 150 years is in this phrase).

We know that Cezanne had become an artist and a great artist. But the process had not been simple, and recognition had not been coming. And he really wanted it, had been awaiting. The official status of the artist in France was determined by the acceptance of his paintings by the so-called Salon, Salon of Paris, the annual official exhibition of paintings. Pictures for this exhibition were selected by a special jury. It represented the so-called “academicians”, academicians of art. The paintings of Paul Cézanne were never accepted for exhibitions in these Salons. He exhibited with the Impressionists in 1874 and 1877.

But official Paris did not accept the impressionists. The word itself was almost a curse in the circles of official art.

At the same time, his friend, Zola, exploded in glory. His articles defined fashion. But he did not write laudatory articles about Cezanne. For the simplest reason: he did not understand how great Cezanne was. Perhaps he did not even realize that he was just a very good artist. Because there were artists about whom he wrote, and whom I go around in museums as absolutely uninteresting. But they remained friends.

Zola died in 1902 4 years before Cezanne's death. The name Cezanne was already known to a wider circle, but it took off in 1904. In the Paris Autumn Salon of 1904, an entire hall was allocated to Cezanne. It was the first real success, a real Triumph of the artist.

At this time, Zola's wife sold everything, including the house, so that there was something to live on. The savings left after Zola were not great. And sorting out the junk in the attic, she came across a picture of Cezanne, which he had once presented to Zola, and they threw it into the attic. The cost of this painting was above all that remained after Zola in the family! This picture is now being exhibited in the Orsay Museum. This is a "clock" picture.

I'm sad. So, we do not notice the brightest stars nearby, but pay attention, sometimes, to very faded lights.

### 3. Henri Matisse (1869 - 1954)

Surprisingly, Matisse began painting by accident at the age of 20. After the appendicitis operation: he had nothing to do in the hospital, and this was the beginning of his drawing, and then painting. I, personally, have always been struck by the strength of his line. Elasticity, energy comes from the lines of Matisse. Perhaps the Russian collector Sergei Shchukin understood his strength and greatness earlier, than others, and began to buy the paintings of his. In large quantities. As a result, after the revolution in Russia, the entire collection was expropriated, and Petersburg (Leningrad) turned into the city with the largest collection of Matisse.

I just want to add an episode to this. Shchukin fled from Russia during the revolution. He settled in France in some small place. Decades later, Matisse, who, as it turned out, lived not far from this place, found out that Shchukin lived very close by. He called Shchukin and asked why he did not contact him.

The answer was: "because I don't have money now to buy your paintings." (Friendship based on the purchase of paintings.)

### 4. El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos; 1541 - 1614)

The paintings of El Greco are supremely original. This originality is amazing. What are its roots?

The answer to this question goes to the early childhood of El Greco.

In 1997, we spent 2 months in Crete. We lived in the wonderful resort town of Agia Pelagia, about 20 kilometers from the capital of Crete, Heraklion.

3 km on the road away from Heraklion, and then another two kilometers into the mountains is the town of Fodele. Tradition claims that El Greco was born there. We have been there many times. It is very nice to have lunch there. But we went there not only for this, but mainly to visit the house in which El Greco was born. Not the house itself, in which there was nothing interesting to attract us. But very close to this house there is an incredibly beautiful, and almost like a toy Orthodox Church. It is very small, beautiful and traditional. And all covered with frescoes. I show it on page 40.

The frescoes of 11th century, very well preserved. In several places, where, likely, they had been deteriorating, new frescos were painted in the 13th century. That was latest that something was painted there. And here we go, in the style of these frescoes, both the faces and colors on them, one can feel the reference point for the El Greco's art. He spent all his childhood near or inside this church, and its influence on his imagination seems to be obvious. Of course, customary for the time he was taught drawing and painting, but at some point those paintings he observed in his childhood exploded in him with the new specifically his painting style. On this site

<http://www.angelfire.com/super2/greece/fodele.html>

you can see the place, this church. But a few photographs of the painting inside do not serve justice of it. There is not enough light in this church, and one is not allowed to take pictures with a flash. But the elongation of the faces so typical of El Greco can, surely, be seen.

A few words about the history of this church. It was a period of the Crusader wars, the Crusades. For years troops marched from Europe to Palestine, to the holy land. On the way, they stopped for months. Architects, painters came with them, built churches along the way and painted them. Of course, the churches were small to have time to build them. And as this church shows, brilliant artists and builders came along. Humanity is fortunate that El Greco's talent was triggered by it.

One more small remark, just about us, about our visitations to this church.

As we arrived for the first time, in 1997, not a single person could be found near this church. We walked around, we went inside. We enjoyed this beauty all alone. The next time, after a few years, a girl, a schoolgirl, was

on duty by it. She watched that everything were kept in order. And the house, in which El Greco allegedly was born was already called a museum, but there was nothing in it. However, the door to the church was already locked, and in the absence of the girl it was no longer possible to watch the frescos.

The last time, a couple of years later, it was already a museum, and for the entrance to the church one had to pay a fee.

5. Giotto (1267-1337)

Giotto was the greatest Renaissance artist. There is a legend that one of the greatest artists of the late Renaissance, 15-16 centuries, perhaps even Leonardo da Vinci, said that we know what our end is, while our goal is to achieve the level of Giotto. I will not begin to explain, what he did in art, I do not have right to do so. The modern image of nature and people comes from Giotto. It was different before him.

Here's a legend. In fact, it is made of two merged stories. The first story is about how he got to Florence.

He was 10 years old. He grazed sheep and, customary for him, he had been with a pointed stone knocking the image of a sheep off a smooth plate. The artist Cimabue from Florence had been passing by. He saw the produce of the boy and it quite impressed him; he suggested to the boy that he takes him to Florence and teaches him painting. As boy's father agreed, Giotto went to Florence. He quickly surpassed his teacher.

The second story happened much later. Giotto must had been over 25, and he had been already very famous in and around Florence. The pope heard about him. It was most likely Boniface the VIII. He sent his man to Giotto to bring a sample of Giotto's work to decide, whether to invite him to do the painting inside of the Cathedral of St. Peter. Before he visited Giotto in Florence, the man passed through Siena, collecting, also, the samples of drawings of the local artists. As he entered Giotto's workspace, he asked for Giotto's drawing that he could present to His Holiness. Giotto took the brush and paper, dipped the brush in red paint, and drew a circle. Accurate perfect Circle. The pope's envoy did not understand, he asked: is that all? That's it, Giotto answered. The messenger decided that he was being bullied, but sent everything to

Rome. The Pope understood, and invited Giotto. In Italian there is even a joke based on this story.

But here's something funny that happened to me; it originates from this legend. I once visited Princeton, and one of the best, if not the best, mathematical physicist in the world, Elliott Lieb, invited me to his office for a talk about Mathematics. There, answering his question, I turned to the board, drew a circle that I needed, as part of my answer, and turned back to him. Elliott sat with his mouth open and was silent. "What happened?" I asked. He silently pointed a finger at the board. I turned, saw nothing but my circle, and turned back to him. Elliott said: "Vitali, this is a perfect circle!" And he added "only perfect person may draw perfect circle". (The last statement belongs, perhaps, to Raphael; at least, I heard such a legend). Such was this funny story. I did not agree to draw a circle again. He did not erase it; it remained on his board. I don't know how many years.

Returning to Giotto, there is a story that seems sad, but instructive to me, so, here it is.

In Florence, in the church of Santa Croce, there are several chapels painted by Giotto. However, one of them has a wall, on which there is only a large spot with a Giotto pattern, and the rest of the space is empty. Giotto had painted the whole wall. However, 100 years later, the descendants of those aristocrats, who ordered this cappella from Giotto, decided that the fashion had changed. They invited some new fashionable at the time artist and repainted the wall over Giotto! Only in the 20th century did it happen by chance that a Giotto's painting was discovered behind the uninteresting work. The daub was erased, and only the discovered piece of Giotto's work remained intact.

Here we go. Going after fashion.

6. Pierre-Auguste enoir (1841 - 1919) and

Claude Monet (1840 - 1926).

What can I add to what is known about these great artists, creators of impressionism?

Everything is written, everything is studied. However, there is one legend that I cannot find in literature now, and which, in any case, aligns with what had been happened during the creation of impressionism. Therefore, I call it “legend”, not fact.

I will also add an observation, which I can't remember, whether I read about it.

So, the legend. The Impressionists were not accepted by official Paris. They were not allowed to exhibitions in the Salons. However, the family of a very powerful publisher Charpentier liked Renoir. There are several wonderful and well known paintings by Renoir, in which the wife and 2 children of this publisher were painted. And Charpentier's wife supported and promoted Renoir. As a result, she succeeded and a certain number of impressionist works were allowed in the Salon. Their work was hung on the top floor, in fact in the attic, where there was almost no light. (We all know how important light is to the work of the impressionists). At the same time, in the main hall there was found a place for just one painting by Renoir. And on the opening day, it was this picture that was a sensation, people crowded around it. The very next day, this picture had joined the rest of the impressionists in their location. So, it was not by chance that they were not accepted into the Salon. Academics defended themselves (and their customers) from the Impressionists.

A promised short remark is that soon after the just described Charpentier's wife managed to get Renoir awarded with some well-respected French order, which Renoir dreamed of. Naturally, he wanted to accept it, but he knew that he could expect a negative reaction to this coming from Monet. So, he had written to Monet a letter that is preserved, asking in it for forgiveness of his weakness, weakness of accepting the order.

My last remark applies, perhaps, even more to Vincent van Gogh.

Both Renoir and Monet were great inventors in art. Monet, I think, to high extent so. Somewhere in 87-88 there was a large exhibition, at which they exhibited their works. Van Gogh visited this exhibition, and was absolutely delighted with the new style that he saw in the works of both Renoir and Monet.

All van Gogh's work had since been performed in this style, which he had further developed. It became the Van Gogh style that we know of. He exploited it the last two years of his life.

Renoir and Monet subsequently never painted in this style. It did not correspond to their mental state. These were calm people who cherished staying in good mood.

But it matched exactly Van Gogh's boiling hectic character.

## 7. One comment about the art of Catalonia.

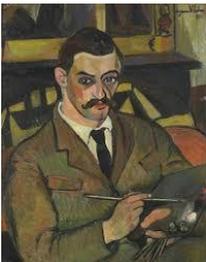
On one of our visits to Barcelona, we visited the museum of Catalan art. We were shocked. In the 13-14 centuries, the level of Catalan art was not lower than Italian. How did it happen that we did not know anything about it?

On the same visit, we went to the mountains in a monastery, where there were many works of the Impressionist period. And the same picture: there are many wonderful artists, of whom we never heard of. I've inquired someone in this museum. There was a peculiar answer. "We love our artists, we support them, and we keep their art with us." So, art was not for sale and did not go outside. It remained inside and therefore did not affect the development of art in Europe. The effect of excessive love. I've described it in my story about life of Ira Ryleeva – Reichwarger. Could I sell her work to make her famous? No. I could offer them, as gifts, but not sell them. The money that could be get for them would not be substantial enough so as not to offend me.

Three contemporary Catalan artists, Picasso, Miro and Dali, were "lucky." Revolutions, wars and unrest in Spain and Europe forced them to roam the world and made them World artists, not just Catalan.

2020, April

About Susana Valadon,  
and her son Maurice Utrillo and friend Henri Toulouse-Lautrec.



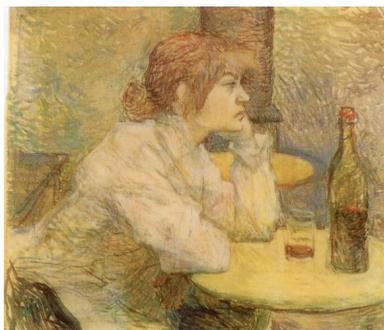
About pictures above: Susana Valadon, as a model for Renoir, dancing with, perhaps, his brother. Below is Portrait of Maurice Utrillo, painted by his mother Valadon, and next self-portrait of Toulouse-Lautrec.

Once we were lucky. We stumbled upon a strange story linking three great artists, Susana Valadon, her son Maurice Utrillo and her friend Henri Toulouse-Lautrec.

(However, perhaps, any interesting story begins with some kind of luck.)  
But first, a few words about each of these heroes.

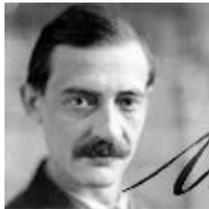
The life of Susana Valadon (1865-1938) began very hard. She grew up with her mother, not knowing her father. Mother was a laundress. Susanna's name at birth was different. Her name was Marie-Clementine, but everyone called her just Marie. She took the name Susana later when she began to sign her first works. I will continue to call her Susana. Susana tried to become a circus acrobat. But once she fell, twisted her leg, and this ended her career of an acrobat. To earn a living, from the age of fifteen she worked as a model for artists. She was lucky in that mostly they were wonderful artists. For example, Renoir, Mary Cassatt. Susana watched their technique, and this taught her somewhat. She liked to draw from her early childhood, and she painted everywhere, on the sidewalk, on everything that came at hand. But being a model, she was embarrassed by her drawings, and preferred not to show them to anyone.

Toulouse-Lautrec appeared in Paris in 1882, and someone recommended Susana to him, as a model. Between them quickly developed close relationship. So, Susana (still Marie that time) showed her drawings to Toulouse-Lautrec. He liked them, and at some point he took Susana to Degas, who also liked them and began to teach her how to draw. Legend says that, when he saw her drawings, Degas said "she is one of us." The highest praise from such person, who strongly disliked women. Of course, Susana was a model for both, and, allegedly, also a lover. "Allegedly" refers only to Degas. Her relationship with Toulouse-Lautrec is known and much has been written about it. There are many portraits of Valadon painted by Toulouse-Lautrec. Unlike Renoir and other artists, who treated her, as a model, he wasn't interested in stressing her female beauty, but would rather show her character, strong, purposeful, more like male one, than female. It was this her character that attracted Toulouse-Lautrec. Here is one of these portraits:



About five years later, the following story ended their relationship. I know more, than one interpretation of it. One of them is described by Henri Perruchot. Omitting details, once Susanna and her mother argued in the kitchen. Toulouse-Lautrec was the subject of their dispute. At some point Susana sharply stated: "I want to marry him!" As she turned, Toulouse-Lautrec was standing in the doorway. They looked at each other, and Toulouse-Lautrec walked away without saying a word, thus, ending the relationship.

Let's move on to Utrillo. He was born in December 1883 (and lived until 1955). Valadon never revealed, who his father was. Of course, many jokes surfaced, but I will ignore them. Until 1891 her boy was Maurice Valadon. Spanish artist Miguel Utrillo (1862-1934), a friend of Susana, insisted that for the good of Maurice, he should not be seen in the eyes of society as anybody's bastard, and the simple solution is that he acquires different, than hers last name. He offered his own name. Nobody doubts that Miguel Utrillo was not Maurice's father. Yet, this is how had come about Maurice Utrillo! Wonderful story, on my taste. Miguel's noble gesture paid off. Although he himself had never acquired fame, his name, Utrillo, ascended to Olympus due to Miguel's noble cause.



*Maurice, Utrillo, V*



The boy Valadon-Utrillo had a very difficult childhood. Throughout it, his grandmother took care of him. He had early alcohol addiction and he spent 10 years with interruptions in a psychiatric institution, in a place called Sannois in the suburbs of Paris. The building is now turned into Utrillo Museum. He was 21, when his mother decided to try to occupy him with drawing and painting. She taught him a little. Maurice talent turned out to be incredible. Susana sent him postcards to the hospital with views of Paris, and Maurice painted pictures from them. This type of painting became Utrillo's style, his main object of interest. Later, he had been painting on the streets of Paris. He turned into a quite accepted artist, and the second half of his life was a success.

There is no need to talk much about the life of Toulouse-Lautrec, it is well-known. But I will make a remark. Of course, he is from a very wealthy family. We once visited his family castle in Albi, near the city of Toulouse. The family made it the Toulouse-Lautrec Museum. It is full of his art, and without having been there, it is impossible to understand the full power and diversity of this artist. Again, being wealthy, his family did not need to sell his work. And the bulk of it is there. Importantly for this story, let me recall that his mother brought him to Paris in 1882 (photo of Toulouse-Lautrec).



Now our story starts. In the early 2000s my wife and I visited the Utrillo Museum of Sannois. We were with our friends from Paris, the mathematician Jean-Michel Bismut and his wife Analisa. At the time there was held a very interesting and large exhibition of the art of Susana Valadon and Utrillo. It was our luck that sheer chance led us to see it that time. Naively, we assumed that the exhibited works of these artists made the permanent collection of the museum. Yet, no, this museum doesn't hold its own permanent collection.

Among other works, we ran there across a portrait of Toulouse-Lautrec painted by Valadon. (I read somewhere that she did not paint portraits of

Toulouse-Lautrec, but we all remember the mentioned painting at this exhibition.) There was there a portrait of Utrillo, also painted by Valadon, in which Utrillo is about the same age as Toulouse-Lautrec in the latter mentioned portrait. The alikeness of the faces struck us. The resemblance could not be accidental, and, in all likelihood, she, Valadon, knew, who Utrillo's father was. It wasn't allowed to photograph at that exhibition, and there were no postcards sold with those portraits. So, I cannot show them here. But for my wife and I there was (almost) no more mystery about Utrillo's paternity. We (almost) have no doubt, anymore.

MAY, 2020 .

## Russian icon

Some of the readers of the first version of this text about art would like to know more in some places. "I understand," one of my friends wrote to me, "what I ask is completely trivial even for a simple lover, but I feel that I am only becoming an art lover reading your text, so write a little more." Forgive me, experts and amateurs, I will only add a little about Russian icons.

Painting Russian icons is an extremely interesting and complex process. I'm afraid to even touch it, but I want to tell about one moment, even psychological, rather than picturesque. However, first one remark about paints. The choice of paint in an icon (and in other forms of painting) depends on what emotion the painter wants to cause in the viewer. Say, red paint makes you feel concerns, anxieties, while green as well as blue, on the contrary, are calming. The role of blue paint is to indicate holiness. However, often one paint is applied on top of another. And you look at the green background, everything is calm, but in the subconscious you are worried, because this green background is painted on top of red. This red color is not visible, but it still "breaks out", and being invisible, affects our moods, causing alarm. Of course, in photographs of icons, in their reproductions it is impossible to feel this effect.

We now turn to the part of the Icons structure that are associated with the psychology of a Russian character. In the Russian language there is the word "МИР" ( MIR). The wealth of the word is not immediately apparent. One meaning is "Peace". "Peace" is of course a peaceful, calm life. Peace can be (but may not be) between countries, between families, but also within the same family. However, another meaning of the same word is

the World, the Universe. But there is also a third meaning - the community (very close community). For example, this is reflected in the phrase " мы пошли туда всем миром", i.e. "we went there with the whole our community."

These three meanings in one word are not an accident. Take a look at the Russian icon. There is no standard perspective. It is painted as if different parts of it were drawn from different places. For example, Madonna looks at you, the artist stands directly against her. And she holds the child so that the child must look at her mother, at the Madonna. But the child is facing us, that is, the artist is at the same time on the other side. The face of the child is looking at the artist. That is, a picture is appears to be painted simultaneously by two artists. In fact, this effect is observed throughout the icon. I reveal a secret: we observe the event "with the whole МИР", that is, with our entire community. Many eyes see this, and an artist, one artist observes and draws an Event on behalf of the whole community, on behalf of the world. You will also see small squares in the Russian icon around the perimeter of the picture - pictures of what is happening outside the church, at a certain distance from the Central event. Because there are representatives of the community (world) of this artist. And what they see should also be captured. This is a vision of the community, the world. This approach reflects a deep character trait. There is no individualism in the Russian character, but on the contrary, a community-based approach. Therefore, any comparison of the Western approach to events and people, in which the individual is above all, with the Russian approach, in which Community is above all and the interest of "our world", is at least naive. Learn the icons, they were created for centuries by the people, they came from within the people.

Writing about icons, I just can not help but say a few words about Andrei Rublev, the greatest Russian icon painter and artist. However, I'm afraid to talk about him; he is too big for that. I see in him the Giotto of Russian painting. He lived and wrote sometime around the year 1400 (approximately between 1360/1370 and 1427/1430). From his surviving paintings, for example in the Tretyakov Gallery, it is impossible to move away. I can't move away. Everything in them is magnificent, but the "plasticity" of the forms, the "plasticity" of the figures and even the composition amazes me especially. If you ask me what I mean by the word "plasticity," I honestly answer that I do not know. I just hope that the reader now has the same feeling as I do. As always with real art,

reproductions do not evoke the same sensation power as the originals. However, I will draw an analogy in our world. Russian ballet is also particularly distinguished by its plasticity, the beauty of plasticity (again, do not ask me what I call plasticity; this is my feeling, and I only hope that you have the same one).

In 2003 there was a big conference in Moscow in honor of the centenary of the birth of one of the greatest mathematicians in Russia and the world Kolmogorov. I also gave a presentation at this conference. We were lucky. The organizers booked tickets for us, speakers, for the ballet "Giselle". One of my colleagues and friends in Moscow, Professor Boris Kashin, invited me and my wife and provided us with even a few tickets. For several decades, living in Israel, I did not attend ballet, and the performance was a cultural shock for me, a positive shock. Beauty and harmony amazed me.

What I call plastic was all over. Not only in the dancing, but in general in the whole combination: music, dance, scenery. My wife Luda was even surprised to see that I almost cry from this harmony and beauty.

I think this plasticity is part of the state of the Russian people.

One thing always amazes me when I compare the influence of Giotto on the development of Renaissance art and the influence of Rublev on the development of Russian painting. Giotto changed the art of painting. According to the great Renaissance artists, he identified the development of Renaissance painting. I would expect a similar influence of Rublev on painting in Russia. But none of this happened. The reason for this, I think, is completely trivial. Lack of roads, "ease" of movement. In Italy, all the artists went to see Giotto's painting, studied it. Now think about how easy it was to move around Russia. In winter in a blizzard, when everything is covered with snow and roads are not visible? In spring or autumn, when were these roads a swamp? Short periods of summer remain, with the risk of being stuck for a whole year. They talked about his works, the rumor went through Russia. But some talented prodigy could not afford such a journey.

Strange reasons sometimes determine development.

