

A GEM IN MOSCOW  
(Sybil Ory Morris)

One of the most famous museums in the world is the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. It abounds with over 55,000 works of art and deserved more insightful treatment than it received on the last day of the recent USA-USSR summit. Did it seem somewhat profane and irreverent that the only inside glimpse of this important museum offered to a world-wide television audience was reduced to trivia instead of substance?

On our visit there we first sought out "The Virgin of Vladimir," the most venerated of the icons. Her carefully modulated face is particularly haunting. Against a rich olive background the vermilion-colored lips and large, sorrowful eyes stand out as she looks calmly past the Child in an expression which communicates apprehension.

Pavel Tretyakov (1832-1898) first collected Western European engravings and paintings by old Dutch masters. Swiftly his interest and collection grew. He became one of the first private collectors to recognize the great significance of icons as relics of Russian artistic culture. He acquired magnificent icons of the 15th and 16th century Novgorodian, Muscovite and Pskovian schools. The acquisition of his first Russian painting ("The Temptation" by Nikolai

Schilder) on May 12, 1856 marks the beginning of the Tretyakov Gallery. This collector felt it his civic duty to show portraits of prominent figures in the field of Russian culture and science. His house in Lavrushinsky Lane soon became too small to show off his art acquisitions advantageously so he built exhibition halls as an annex. A portrait of Pavel Tretyakov done in 1883 by Ilya Repin shows a handsome, bearded man in a serious, reflective mood seated with arms folded. In the background are several of his paintings.

The city of Moscow accepted the vast collection of Pavel Tretyakov and that of his late brother as a gift in 1892. Six years later after the death of this devoted collector of art the gallery was administered by the mayor, a board and appointed curators. Under the guidance of several distinguished artists on the board Tretyakov's buying policy was continued.

Among the many painters who responded to the mood of the people during the 1860's was Vasilii Perov. He gave prominence in his paintings to social questions. "The Arrival of a New Governess" depicts a moral tale: the young, shy and modest governess is shown presenting herself to a boorish merchant, his family and household. In a way it suggests the tragedy of the whole Intelligentsia.

Many of the paintings in the gallery have to do with religious innovations. Vasilii Surikov finished his epic

painting "Boyarina Morozova" in 1887. It depicts an incident which occurred during the spiritual and cultural crisis of 17th century Russia. Amidst a group of sympathetic onlookers, the determined Morozova is being dragged off to prison for resisting Patriarch Nikon's dictum to use a "new sign of the cross." She raises her right hand in a defiant gesture to make the sign of the cross according to ancient rite.

The Tretyakov has known many innovations. After the October Revolution of 1917 Lenin nationalized the gallery as a museum performing "educational functions on a national scale" but he perpetuated the name "Tretyakov" in tribute to its original founder. The gallery has since absorbed many nationalized private art collections and incorporated smaller museums and galleries. In time, the Department of Soviet Art expanded along with the development of artists in the USSR. The gallery now includes contemporary works of noteworthy artists throughout the 15 Soviet republics.

There is a game that museum aficionados play -- what is your favorite painting? Or which one would you take home if you could? There is a 15th century icon (egg tempera on wood) at the Tretyakov entitled "The Entombment" and it is striking. In it the Virgin, John the Divine, and Joseph of Arimathea are bidding farewell to the wrapped body of Christ.

Among the eight figures in the icon is Mary Magdalene dressed in red in accordance with iconographic tradition.

Her hands are starkly upraised suggesting the poignancy of a lament. Her wail seems to echo among the stylized rocks in the background. My favorite icon is strongly surrealistic and even resembles 20th century work.

With assistance from a desk clerk at Intourist Hotel we had meticulously mapped out the way to #10 Lavrushinsky Pereulok but, unthinkingly, we had failed to ask the way back. After our visit as we waited on a street corner near the Tretyakov for some kind of transportation, a kind and sensitive muscovite (I daresay, a babushka) approached us. "Americans?" she asked. We nodded, she crossed her hands over her heart, smiled and said, "Americans, I love." Exhausting our scant knowledge of Russian within seconds we, nevertheless, communicated our problem. Expeditiously she stopped the right bus, climbed up before us, paid our fares, alerted the driver to our plight, and debarked. As the bus pulled off we could see her smiling and waving. I flashed her the peace sign in the hope that she knew that peace and love are inextricably linked.