A LONELY PATH IN MODERN ART
The Art of Alexander Zhdanov

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Alexander Zhdanov, alongside the other masters of the so-called "Sixties Generation" of Russian artists, entered the artistic fray after Khrushchev’s "thaw" and immediately staked out a position with the "nonconformists," as they were called back then. In many ways he shared their common inclinations — the search for new methods and styles, the taste for experimentation — yet he maintained at the same time the uniqueness of his fiercely independent and particularly lonely path in modern art.

For most representatives of "unofficial" art in those days the important thing was reconnecting with the traditions of the Russian avant-garde, from which they had been cut off for nearly half a century, and gaining synchronization with developments in Western art, about which they had only fragmentary information: the processes and events of Western art were covered by the official press rather tendentiously and were frequently misrepresented.

Whenever a Russian artist turned toward modernism or the avant-garde, annihilating criticism "from above" would instantly appear, accompanied by persecution and various bans levied at the work in question. Thus the artistic directions which provoked the most scathing censure from the propagandists evoked the special interest of those artists who stood on the far side of the party line — including Alexander Zhdanov. To the adherents of Social Realism and to the official critics, "abstractionism" and the "avant-garde" were a primary target, their very own Public Enemy Number 1. Despite this fact, a veritable pantheon of the representatives of "unofficial" art passed through the experience of abstract art at a certain stage in their development: Belyutin and his studiomates, Zverev, Nemukhin, Lev Kropivnitsky, Shteinberg, Masterkova, Infante, Vetomov, Mikhnov-Voitenko, Kamensky, Sitnikov, Rabin, and many others. For the majority of these artists — professionals both by training and by lifestyle — it was particularly important to overcome as quickly as possible the inertia of the academic training they had received which slowed their growth and development as artists.

This process of decisive withdrawal from the routines of the academic naturalism planted in him during his years of study can be seen in the work of Alexander Zhdanov, who trained at the Grekov Academy of Art. And at the root of this transformation was not so much a social motive as was his personal sense of the aesthetic.

By force of the sheer inner inspiration that drove him, the artist mastered the avant-garde languages of the world and pushed their boundaries even further out — languages defined by the use of subjectlessness or pure abstraction, by radical collages that continued the traditions of neo-Dadaist pop art, and by figurative expressionism.

Figurative expressionism was the path followed by the most brilliant avant-gardists, artists like Zverev, Kropivnitsky, Pyatnitsky, Yakovlev, and others. Like Zhdanov, they pushed outward to the most extreme, radical forms of the trend and took expressive deformation and the violent rage of their artistic signatures to their limits. At the same time, and in spite of a marked analogy to Western art, the Russian "nonconformist" artists remained different in their very essence, and that essence was formed from the spiritual realities of their art — in particular, a specific national feeling for form. And this sense of originality was evident in Zhdanov in full measure.

Zhdanov’s originality is observed at all stages of his development and artistic formation, independent of his use of style and device and the changes rung by his various creative periods. From his first steps and on throughout the entire span of his work, there is a distinctly evident tendency for courageous experimentation and the constant renovation of his personal artistic language, a fascination — shared with other "nonconformists" — directed toward the modern, the abstract, the collage, and toward pop art. An expressive artist, he discovers his isolation quite early, beginning to work in the medium of "unofficial" art during the young periods of his
life in the Far East and to the south of Rostov. The independent nature of his outlook on life, his specific point of view, and his original artistic signature made of him a lonely outsider not only in his early, provincial surroundings, but later on in life, in the capital. He always avoided linking himself to any group or any trend, for both one and the other meant restriction. Zhdanov is confident that Art, like Life, exists without “isms” — there is Art, or there isn’t Art; there’s nothing in between.

Within the existing social tendency toward subjective division of artistic styles into “isms,” the particular, deeply Russian essence of his gift invariably prevails in Zhdanov’s self-expression through the abstract, abstract figurativism, abstract portraiture, abstract landscape, abstract subjectivism, abstract topicalism, and the abstract symbolism of avant-garde expressionism and pop art.

Alexander Zhdanov was born in the south of Russia in that darkest of years, 1938, at the very height of Stalin’s campaigns of repression. His mother was a librarian; his father, upon completion of school in Moscow and graduation from university in Rostov-on-the-Don, became a schoolteacher in the Cossack village of Vyoshenskaya. From the age of seven on, Zhdanov spent his childhood and youth in military garrisons on the North Dvina in the Arkhangelsk region and on the Amur River in the Ussuriysky region of the Far East territory, where his father was serving out the postwar years: for many years he was denied demobilization and threatened with the loss of his Party card if he insisted on being released. The peculiar landscapes of these northern and far-eastern lands with their mystical nature entered into the soul of this emotionally open lad and into his deep and delicate perceptions of the world. And the sociopolitical realities of this Siberian land of men sent into exile left its inevitable mark.

His early mastery of the plastique and arsenal of the newest artistic trends, combined with the artist’s own native gifts, brought an entirely modern trend to every period of his work, starting from the very earliest. But there was also an ever-present, vivid element, drawn from the earth, connecting him to the sources and heritage of Russia’s artistic culture from the past.

In his earliest (yet already completely mature) artistic period in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, rural and poetic motifs prevailed in Zhdanov’s work: a self-portrait set against the distant steps fading into dusk, or two poets sitting at table with the Muse.... All of his genres of that period — the landscapes and the portraits — are marked by a most unusual sense of color. His early colors were ascetically restrained, dimly muffled, the colors of earth and twilight — a use of color that was quite complicated and unusual while still retaining a perception of refinement, energy, and bewitchment. Muffled, softly fused tonal gradations are combined most originally with a severe geometry of form and a sharp deformation of figure. Such a unique and plastic device is closer to the art of folklore found in primitive woodcarving than to the abstract geometricism of Cubism, Postcubism, or the Western Modernism of current art in general. It is readily apparent that the “archaic” beginnings of the young Zhdanov prevailed, strongly and essentially, over the the aestheticism of “Westernization.”

His use of color, it is true, speaks of a perceptible experience in the still-young artist with the skills of the French school and the achievements of the early Russian avant-garde from the turn of the century. And the world of images within his pictures — with their severe lapidary expression, the utter laconism in their portrayal, and the “chopped” plasticity of his flat figures — has emerged from a tangible foothold rooted directly in living nature and in real landscapes. At the expense of those indissoluble roots in real landscapes, at the expense of the specifics of color and form, these images, concrete in their origins, transform into generalized, conditional, plastic images of their own kind, a purely symbolic condition, and this condition reflects our present-day existence on Earth at this very moment.

In the symbolic universe within Zhdanov’s work there undoubtedly is the clearly visible presence of a peculiarly artistic understanding and an adherence to the spiritual worldview of the Russian tradition. Such national beginnings as Zhdanov’s differ sharply from all norms and criteria for “folk style” in Soviet art as propagated by the dogmatists of Socialist Realism. The dogmatists’ standard for “folk style” was the Russian realism of the 19th-century “Peredvizhniki,” but the “non-conformist” artists usually failed to see the evident relationship with the “Peredvizhniki” tradition. Strange as it may seem at first glance, however, in all of Zhdanov’s
work through different periods and in different degrees there is consistently found a living, organic connection with the classical Russian art of the previous century. This connection is manifested in a completely different way than is found in the official imitators of classical realism. The imitators' connection with the classics is found generally at the level of style, line, and other external, formal elements. Zhdanov, at those same levels, would at first glance seem to have nothing in common with the classical tradition, coming closer first to abstractionism, then to expressionism, then to pop art. But in fact his continuity from and connection to Russian classicism is found somewhere far deeper: in the spirituality and exalted sentiment of his artwork. The loftiness and spirituality of Zhdanov's work continues the line of romantic composition in Russian landscapes by our greatest classical masters, artists like Savrasov and Vasilev, Korovin and Podenov, Vrubel and Levitan. It's true that in Zhdanov's work these main qualities lie half-exposed, unobtrusive, but they make themselves felt even in those works where the elements of a landscape are pushed to the limits of abstraction, as, for example, in the canvas "The Final Road of Vladimir Monomakh."

Zhdanov's aloof, spiritual landscapes, abstracted from a concrete and recognizable reality, vividly display both their essence and the state of the artist's soul as captured in the act of creation directly from nature. At the same time he also is close to the tradition of European expressionism, in whose context at the core of things it is not so important in what manner the inner is expressed in the outer — a generalized landscape, an abstract symbol, or something else altogether. It seems as though, within the scheme of Western expressionism, he finds the northern European style of abstract expressionism — which has wound its course through nearly all of this century, with its sources in Van Gogh and Munch — to be much closer and more real to him than its American counterpart. The primary and most powerful manifestations of northern European expressionism were German. And it is there that are found examples of such an organic combination of fearless innovation with a national, "earthy" foundation, such as with Nolde.

Within the context of his entire span of work, let us stop and examine the details of his personal artistic formation. At a certain stage of his maturation he broke away from the figurative concrete definition of his earlier works came close to the boundaries of pure abstraction, as in "The Red Dot of Eternity."

The artist drives the expressive generalization of form to its maximum by the extremely ascetic use of color with a minimum of paint — black, red, and white in their primeval purity. Zhdanov employs these basic colors with particular mastery and significance. The black in his work appears as some sort of "Ur substance," a primary material from which all else is extracted. Zhdanov's blacks are endowed with a strong plasticity of expression and a significant power of suggestion that evoke in the viewer a mystical mindset. His black is perceived not as the simple absence of light and color, but as the maximum saturation of darkness with innermost deep meaning: something like magnetized space, exuding magical energies, or the "black holes" in the night sky, absorbing those energies. It seems to have broken through the surface of flatness, forming a gaping abyss and leading to the Underworld, counterbalancing the fathomless pit of the Cosmos. In some ways it is similar to the color-producing darkness of Yakov Byomy's "The Smoke of Pre-Eternity." On some of Zhdanov's canvases the black surface appears as a symbol of an earth-like firmness, hermetically monolithic, inflexible and dense, locked mortally in place. The combination, perhaps unconscious, of this deep black with bright reds and whites of varying degrees of intensity leads to the archetypal Indo-European triad of colors: black, red, and white, in which black is the main color or "anti-color" — a concealed, mysterious, mystical semantic symbol. Using the device of monochromatic abstraction, Zhdanov came to the archetypes of deepest antiquity. In doing so he mythicized the "black theme" in his own way, endowing it with symbolic subtexts which at first glance are not to be found either in the traditional or canonical cultures and filling them with personal, anxious, dramatic intonations.

In this "Black Period" of abstract painting, Zhdanov also brings frequently into his work conditional, yet clearly recognizable, figurative motifs and images. Often these are motifs of landscapes with mythical depictions of prophetic, clever, cautious birds: ravens, jackdaws, rooks, and crows. These symbol-images, magnetizing the author's and viewer's attention, emerge persistently...
as the author's personal "totems" — like spirit-protectors, attending the artist at different stages of his creative work and daily survival; and like spirit-mediators between Life and Death, between Earth and Heaven, between Past and Present.

In Russian folklore the raven is a long-lived prophet, symbolizing wisdom and death, disaster, rebirth, warning, and eternity. There's a folk song in Russia: "Raven, why do you hover over me?..." On the other hand, a black crow on white snow, spotted by Surikov in his own time, became the starting point for depicting "The Frozen Boyars" being carried off to exile from a snow-covered Moscow in simple peasant sledges. Serov, the Russian classical realist, was also distinguished by his special love for these birds. All of this lends reason to maintain that Zhdanov's interpretation of these birds connects his outwardly modernistic art with the ancient traditions of Russian folklore, with its deep roots in paganism, in the supernatural wisdom of magicians and wizards, and, on the other hand, with the traditions of classical Russian art. And all of it is the indisputably organic continuity of the Russian national culture.

In parallel with the paintings of abstract figurative landscapes, Zhdanov creates unique collages, outwardly resembling the devices of pop art. He uses fragments of various packaging and advertising kitsch glued into his paintings, resulting in a surface dotted with loud superpositions, creating a complicated texture plus a text, or subtext. Reproduced snippets from the heights of the museum culture become avant-garde symbols for presenting material with an altered meaning. The appearance of the "Mona Lisa" in a Zhdanov collage brings to mind the scandalizing gestures of Dyurishan and other Western groundbreaking avant-gardists. Today this period of playing epitaph games with the classics has faded into the past, along with the history of worldwide modernism. But Zhdanov's very approach to collage speaks of something completely different, something not of Western artistic traditions. The artist doesn't alienate himself from his material through ironic distancing or parody; on the contrary, it's as though he has merged his art into the subject's philosophical depths of meaning. And in collage exactly the same thing happens as in his work with paints and brushes. His artistic symbol, the image of the black raven, appearing on the surface of the collage "Joconda," underscored all the wisdom and timelessness of the unforgettable representations of Woman created by the great Leonardo. Often the glued snippets and the cast-off bits of urban civilization, seeded into the ground of a painted surface in a Zhdanov collage, can seem like the firmness of earth itself, ready to assimilate and dissolve into itself any foreign strata. Perhaps precisely because of this the painting within his collages strongly dominates the visual trash that has been added to it, as though to prevail over the estrangement of the modern megalopolis and the banalities of mass culture. Though in some ways "barbarous," this completely new possibility for collage, it may be, is not alien to the search for a true, native, artistic culture. But then to this artist-collagist what is alien is the cynical irony that exists as a rule in the Western experience of the realm of neodadaism and pop art. Those experiences were used as ammunition for our local Russian "sotz-art" and "conceptualism." Representatives of those trends — Kabakov, Prigov, and the embarrassing host of others that followed — endlessly continue to exploit the already rather tedious pre-prepared forms of every possible kind of Soviet agit-kitsch.

As we have seen, Zhdanov anarchically ignores the usual differentiations and classifications in art. Uniting seemingly incompatible elements and forcing them to get along together in one plastic space, he confirms the relativity and permeability of the boundaries between objectivity, figurativity, and abstraction, between the mastering of paint and the mastering of collage. In fact, Zhdanov has overcome the false duality between the plastic values of painting and the experimental novelties from the arsenal of the radical "avant garde." His experiences in this sphere are legion, and serve the general conversation that transcends the articles dedicated to the art of Alexander Zhdanov. I will only note that in the late '60s and early '70s this artist, alongside of Rabin, Rukhin, Nemukhin and Ropinsky, was one of the pioneers of collage, assemblage, and the art of found objects.

In the mid-'70s Zhdanov's basic artistic credo was formed: "Return to Nature and God in Art!" A slogan like that may at first glance seem quite strange for an avant-garde artist, but only at first glance. Several artists from the "'60s generation" of Russian unofficial art had mystical aspirations and metaphysical quests, but as
a rule this was manifested through an open return to the recognized forms and images of traditional and canonical religious art. Such, for example, was the religious easel work of Kharitonov, Kozlov, Levitsky, and several others. Zhdanov had a completely different take on the problems of spirituality. His use of mystical and metaphysical themes takes place on an entirely independent, far wider and deeper path. The signs and omens of his “spirituality” don’t lie on the surface. They are not drawn from the ready forms and imagery of religious art. In general, the spirituality in his works is felt as some sort of paganistic worldview running along channels of the Unconscious through the very Spirit of Art. We can measure Zhdanov’s artistic “pantheism” on several semantic levels at once through the animation within his works of the gods and spirits of the polytheistic pantheon. In his most mature and recent work, the artist deliberately and openly plays on the theme of the mythological Pan, the ancient God of Nature. In Zhdanov’s interpretation, Pan is conceived simultaneously as the archetypal spirit of the forests, fields, meadows and swamps; as the embodiment of the poetic trampled might of existence in nature; and as the author’s internal “I” imbued with his personal energy and anxieties. The transmittal of the personal “I” — like poetry from the author’s subconscious — through the expressive devices of his paintings is a trait deeply embedded in the Russian soul, with its dynamic variety of transformations.

The wild creature Zhdanov presents in his paintings rushes headlong through the black gloom of forests in the cold light of the moon, through night fields, along white drifts of snow, cutting across roads or frozen in forest thickets, sitting in frozen poses or leaping from the space beyond the frame. The dynamic Pan, eternally inclined toward transformation, has lived for a long time in Russian myths and in northern landscapes. Vrubel’s Pan — the prophetic satyr, the enchanter-musician — arose at the entrance to this century. Zhdanov’s Pan, living at the end of our century, follows on from the cultural traditions of Russian painters from the “Silver Age.” However, in Zhdanov’s representation, as a master of modernity, Pan’s fury and violence are displayed with particular force. His Pan is no stranger to brutal aggression, and yet at the same time to melancholy lyricism. This Pan is inclined in equal measure to drunken violence and spiritual inspiration. His Pan is subject both to ecstatic joy and frenzied despair. All this drives Pan from the ancient pantheon of the demigods of nature into the much wider sphere of Dionysian art and attitude, a sphere marked by an ecstasy of stupefaction and drunkenness, by rebellious protest against everything static and against the dictates of reason, and by a spiritual “shamanism” toward which Russian culture has been predisposed since time immemorial. Pan within this earthly scale is actually “Everything within Everything.” And for this reason the crowd of spirit-gods is known as the Pantheon, while the habitation of the spirit-demons is called Pandemonium. In becoming the property of Zhdanov’s poetic and artistic thinking, all these representations take root in the living language of his paintings, find flesh and blood and spirit and soul, and breathe life into the “dead languages” of mythology and philosophy. This Pan makes himself known in Zhdanov’s basic artistic interpretations of Earth and Sky and the boundless Cosmos. From a philosophical point of view, Pan is akin to the omnipresent and mysterious elements that permeate all of Nature, including the Cosmos. These elements reveal themselves concretely and visibly, especially for those capable of more than just seeing and hearing a living Nature, but also of feeling her core, rubbing shoulders with her essence, and apprehending those of her secrets which are hidden to a more limited outlook and understanding. Zhdanov’s artistic language — temperamental, spontaneous and impetuous, and fully emancipated — is particularly suited to the penetration of Nature and to self-identification there within. The artist’s ability in his landscapes with Pan to use the formal devices of urban civilization from the avant-garde arsenal alongside of the classical devices of the painter is interesting, graphic, striking; with the help of this technique the personal context of Zhdanov’s works is endowed with completely new content and meaning. The addition of plain bottle caps or small coins to his painted surfaces suggests stars or snowflakes, strengthening the inherent subtext of Pan’s behavior on the canvas: natural, or in a panic brought on through alienation from Nature by our current civilization with its massive garbage, its advertisements and standards, its decay and its monetary insanity.

Zhdanov puts to particularly good use the specific device of splashing paint onto the canvas. This splash device is usually associated with Pollock’s artistic technique, although it was used by many expressionists even before him. Zverev’s style, for instance, is well-

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known, and he was followed and unfortunately is still being followed by a legion of imitators of his art, producing imitations which have degenerated to the merely decorative. In Zhdanov’s basic, organic style, the use of this device is distinguished by its principle originality, it unfolds amongst his other stylistic devices, and its effect ranges far ahead of the original sources in the arsenal of artistic techniques, including the American sources. He readily uses the rhythms of paint splashing and dripping, in pure or combined form, to exploit the strength of their dynamism, their associative qualities, or the spontaneity of “self-drawing images, subjects and conditions.” They are found in his “pantheistic” series and his Chernobyl works with black-and-white and red-and-black landscapes, where a minimum of paint is used and black dominates the land, the cosmos, the figures, the reds of sunsets and the whites of snow. Fractured traces of splashing, along with found objects, invariably take root in his general medium of painted landscapes, both with figures and without, and once again they strike you with the mystique of their natural and poetic boundlessness.

Unfortunately, Russia has been deprived of this inimitable master of the avant-garde: Moscow deported him from the Soviet Union in late 1987. To save his creations from their promised destruction, Zhdanov made a gift of his entire life’s work — 1,500 pieces of art — to America, which had given asylum to his adopted daughter in 1982. However, after the artist was deported along with his wife, whose leg had been broken by the authorities, the American side violated the agreement and threw this priceless gift to the winds of fate.

In 1993 the Ambassador of the Russian Federation organized an exhibit of Zhdanov’s new work — “Alexander Zhdanov: Representing the Russian Avant-Garde” — in his press center in America’s capital, and the Washington Post responded with a huge article. The exhibit proved that Zhdanov, in spite of his betrayal, had not perished, and was courageously following his path in avant-garde art. His undeserved suffering has broadened and deepened his creativity and his themes beyond all measure. The specifics of his conditions in America over the past decade and the lack of an aesthetic environment in a civilized country has even more deeply redoubled the loneliness of the artist in the modern, cash-driven world and the shallow culture of mass consumption.