



UNDAUNTED BY THE IRON CURTAIN, AN
UNASSUMING ECONOMICS PROFESSOR SINGLEHANDEDLY
SAVED SOVIET NONCONFORMIST ART
FROM OBLIVION~AND GAVE IT ALL TO RUTGERS.

THE ARTFUL DODGE

BY BILL GLOVIN
PHOTOGRAPH
BY ALAN GOLDSMITH



*All Aboard:
Norton Dodge rides
Aleksi Sundokov's
ENDLESS TRAIN,
on display at
Rutgers' Zimmerli
Art Museum.*

Norton T. Dodge often thinks about his friend Garig Basmadjian, an international art broker who, before glasnost, had been a major supporter of dissident artists from his native Armenia and other parts of the Soviet Union. In

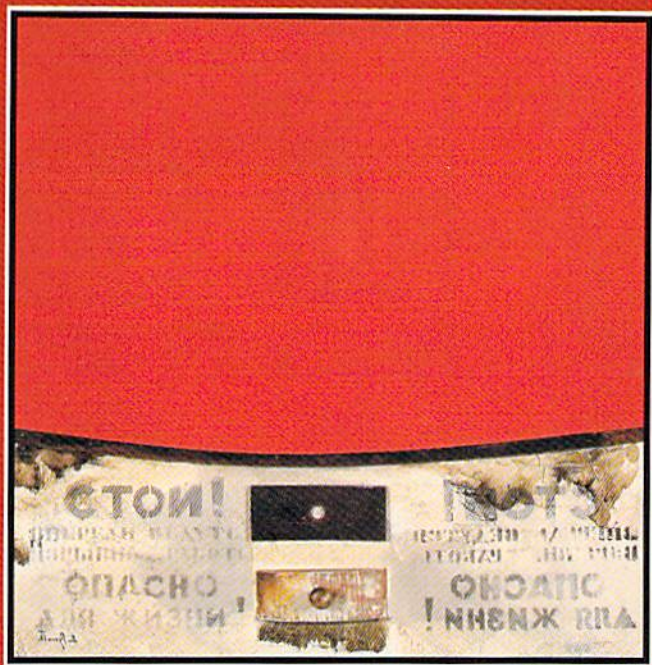
1988, Basmadjian exhibited his Paris gallery's collection at a Moscow

gallery and at the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad. A year later, during a visit to Moscow, Basmadjian left his hotel one morning, accompanied by two young men, and disappeared. "It is suspected that the Russian mafia or the KGB or even some combination of the two were responsible for his disappearance," says Dodge. "The case is still unsolved. The loss of this dear friend has cast a long shadow over my collecting."

Many such shadows have fallen over Dodge, who spent more than half of his 67 years quietly but obsessively working behind the Iron Curtain to build the world's largest and most comprehensive collection of outlawed Soviet art. In

October, selections from the Norton and Nancy Dodge Collection of Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union, an archive of 11,000 unsanctioned paintings, drawings, and artifacts spirited out of the communist realm, will go on display in their new, permanent home at Rutgers' Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum. Estimated to be worth \$15 million, the Dodge collection, which includes works created between 1956 and 1986, will join the George Riabov Collection of Soviet Art, which spans five centuries and has been on permanent display at the Zimmerli since 1993. Together, the Dodge and Riabov collections make Rutgers the world's foremost

It is said collectors are born, not made



EVGENII RUKHIN
Untitled, 1975

center for the study and appreciation of Soviet art.

A professor emeritus of economics at the College of St. Mary's in Maryland, Dodge is vague about the details of what he calls the "rescue" of artwork from the clutches of a totalitarian society. He is more comfortable reflecting on the years he spent climbing dark stairways in search of artists' apartments in strange cities, bearing the mysterious accidents and disappearances that befell many art-world friends, and keeping the KGB off his tail as he went about his clandestine rescue missions. "I came back to my hotel room one time and found my suitcase locked," he recalls. "Someone had gone through my bags. When I picked the lock, I found the key inside."

By 1977, things had gotten too risky, and

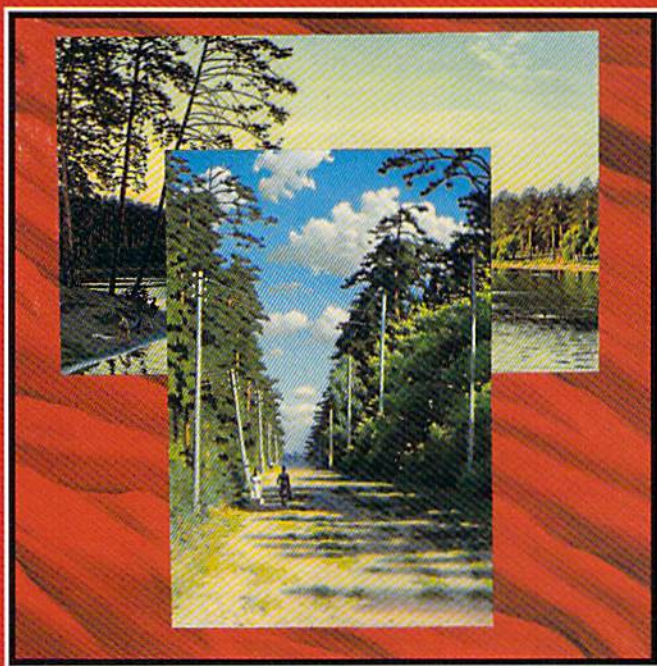
One of Dodge's favorite artists, Rukhin reached legendary status in Russian art circles before dying at age 32 in a mysterious 1976 studio fire in Leningrad. "He would have developed into an international artist of the first order," says Dodge. "That is why [the KGB] probably killed him."

Dodge stopped traveling to the Soviet Union. At this point, he had acquired only about 1,300 of the 11,000 pieces in his collection. Still, he seems stuck with the image promulgated by John McPhee, author of *The Ransom of Soviet Art*: a combination of Columbo, James Bond, and Santa Claus. The book, published last spring and excerpted in *The New Yorker*, won't be on Dodge's Christmas wish list. Dodge took umbrage with McPhee's persistent queries into how the art came out of the Soviet Union, his spec-

ulation that Dodge had ties to the CIA, and his description of Cremona Farm, Dodge's 960-acre residence in southern Maryland, as rundown and neglected.

"People want to believe that the art was smuggled because it's glamorous and gets

This is certainly true in my case.”



ERIC BULATOV

Two Landscapes on a Red Background, 1972-74

headlines,” says Dodge. “But actually very little of it was smuggled.” Dodge claims that he personally removed only 30 to 40 small works. The bulk of the art was brought out by embassy people, art brokers, and émigré artists; he simply made arrangements to buy it once it was in the United States. Still, the McPhee book quotes an unofficial artist as saying, “We were scared to death, all of us, including him.” And Dodge admits that “by the mid-1970s, [the authorities] were grabbing American academics and trading them for spies. And based on my activities and what I had published, they must have had an incredible dossier on me.”

Dodge, who appeared at a Rutgers press conference last summer in a brown suit and sandals, is a legend among Russian artists, many of

Dodge considers himself fortunate to have acquired several early works by Bulatov, 62, an original member of Moscow's influential Sretensky Boulevard Group. “His works are filled with very sophisticated, thought-provoking messages,” says Dodge.

whom call him *modzh*, or “walrus,” because of his bushy mustache. “It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that Norton singlehandedly saved contemporary Russian art from total oblivion. This makes him an evangelical figure,” said Russian art critic Victor Tupitsyn in McPhee’s book. In a *Washington Post* story on Dodge, scholar John Brown described him as “a wonderful guy who’s so different and eccentric, who’d breeze in and out [of artists’ studios] and bring with him this breath of freedom. I

don’t know any artist who ever disliked him or didn’t trust him.” McPhee recounts a visit by Dodge to one sweltering Manhattan loft, where he handed a struggling émigré artist whom he had met in Moscow a wad of bills—totaling \$1,000 or more—as a

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THE ARTFUL DODGE

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"general down payment" on some unspecified future purchase.

Dodge's father was a physics professor at the University of Oklahoma who later became president of Norwich College in Vermont. His mother had a degree in psychology and enjoyed painting. Both were avid accumulators. "It has been said that collectors are born, not made. This is certainly true in my case," says Dodge. An asthmatic child who was often bedridden and home from school, Dodge passed the time by drawing and taking photographs. He also followed in his parents' footsteps, collecting rocks, stamps, coins, and, later, discarded whiskey, rum, and gin bottles.

A scholar of Russian studies at Cornell and Harvard universities, Dodge had a nascent interest in the suppressed art of the Soviet Union that was further piqued by a 1960 *Life* magazine article. After Stalin's death in 1953, Dodge encouraged his father, who had political connections, to apply for visas to the Soviet Union. In April 1955, after arriving in Leningrad, they visited the Hermitage Museum, where early works of Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin, and other French postimpressionists had been put on exhibit after years of storage. The only Russian art they encountered was in the state-sponsored, blatantly optimistic style of Socialist Realism. "Soviet underground artists were nowhere to be seen at that time," says Dodge. "It was still too early." It was during this visit that Dodge got a taste of the censorship facing those who tried to express themselves: His film was confiscated when he photographed a subject that authorities deemed "nonscenic."

Following the political and cultural thaw that Khrushchev initiated in 1956, artists began to test the new limits established by Communist Party censors and the KGB. Dodge's first contacts with nonconformist artists came on his second visit to the Soviet Union in 1962. A friend from Harvard introduced Dodge to his roommate, a nonconformist artist who took Dodge to a private apartment exhibition, reputed to be the first in Moscow devoted

entirely to abstract art since the 1920s. It was there that Dodge acquired his first two works. "When I started collecting, foremost in my mind was the fact that this art could be seized, destroyed, and lost forever," he says. "These artists were sticking their necks out and risking everything. Some ended up in mental institutions or labor camps or perished in mysterious circumstances. Their courage was inspiring."

His work as a scholar of Russian

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economics provided Dodge the means to tour Moscow, Leningrad, and regions that are now independent nations—Ukraine, Georgia, Belarus, Estonia, Latvia, Armenia, Lithuania. He spent his days collecting material for a book on the role of Soviet women in the economy and his nights figuring out how to get in touch with underground artists. When contact was made, he bought small canvases, rolled them up, packed them in his luggage, and took

them home. Often, he was the first American the artists had ever encountered and the first person to buy their work. In the 1970s, his scholarship in Soviet economics began to lose priority to his passion for Soviet art. Dodge began entering the USSR as part of organized tour groups, but he was seldom found on the bus. "This would get noticed after a while by the tour-group leaders, and I would have to shape up," he recalls. "I'd be the only one who didn't go see the Kremlin. I'd seen the Kremlin—in 1955."

On average, he would pay the equivalent of \$200 to \$500 in American currency for each canvas. Dodge spent about \$3 million of his own money on the collection, a hefty sum for an economics professor. Although he won't discuss his net worth or how the money to buy the art materialized, he does allude to his mother's inheritance and his father's ties to Benjamin Graham and Warren Buffet, two renowned Wall Street success stories.

As the size and scope of the Dodge collection began rapidly increasing during the 1980s, Dodge's wife, Nancy, insisted on organizing and improving the conditions under which thousands of works were stored in the barns of Cremona Farm. The Dodges also realized that exhibiting and publicizing the art was imperative—and was as much of a challenge as accumulating it. When major museums turned Dodge away because nonconformist works were not widely accepted by art critics and historians, he turned to galleries at colleges and universities, where arrangements were much easier and interest was much greater. He also organized shows whenever—and wherever—he could: at the annual meetings of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, at the Arts Club in Washington, at a Jewish community center in Maryland. He even opened a short-lived, non-profit gallery in New York's Soho in the early 1980s.

It was not until 1990 that Dodge found a permanent home for his collection. While organizing a show for the CASE Museum of Contemporary



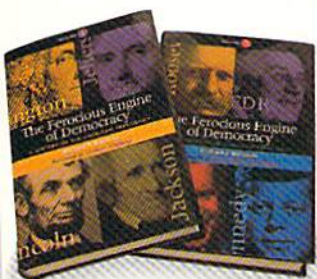
adventures as they crisscrossed the seas from Africa to the West Indies, America, and Great Britain. Having gained their physical deliverance through freedom and their spiritual deliverance through Christianity, slavery to these four men becomes just another episode in lives of serial adventure as sailors, warriors, tradesmen, explorers, carpenters, preachers, musicians, teachers, and, of course, writers. Edited by alumnus Adam Potkay, an assistant professor of English at the College of William and Mary, and Sandra Burr, a graduate student there, this book, which contains biographies of each writer as well as samples of his work, offers a fascinating look at the hybrid culture of Africa, America, Europe, and the Caribbean that was known as the black Atlantic world.

BLACK ATLANTIC WRITERS OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY: LIVING THE EXODUS IN ENGLAND AND THE AMERICAS. EDITED BY ADAM POTKAY (GSNB'90) AND SANDRA BURR. 268 PP. NEW YORK: ST. MARTIN'S PRESS. HARDCOVER, \$39.95; PAPERBACK, \$16.95.

PRESIDENTIAL HISTORY

The Ferocious Engine of Democracy

As alumnus Michael P. Riccards points out in the introduction to Volume 1 of his two-volume history of the American presidency, "the republican executive was an old concept that had proven a failure over and over again; it had led to either breakup or tyranny and oppression, to the Gracchi brothers or to the Caesars." That is, of course, until the American presidency was established in 1789. Today, save for the papacy, it is the longest enduring elective office in history. Riccards, a scholar of the American presidency and president of Fitchburg College, examines the history of this 200-year-old institution, which he calls "a prism through which the concerns and ambitions of Americans have been refracted." Riccards shows how, although the presidency has transformed



itself from generation to generation, it has always been the mouthpiece through which the people have expressed their ideas, ideologies, hopes, and fears. Volume 1 covers the period from Washington to McKinley; Volume 2 covers the period from Theodore Roosevelt to Bush.

THE FEROCIOUS ENGINE OF DEMOCRACY: A HISTORY OF THE

AMERICAN PRESIDENCY (VOLS. 1 AND 2). BY MICHAEL P. RICCARDS (NCAS'66,GSNB'67,'68'70). 404 AND 449 PP. LANHAM, MD: MADISON BOOKS. HARDCOVER, \$34.95 EACH.

FEATHERED FRIENDS

Lifebirds

Through a series of autobiographical memoirs drawn from his love of birding, George Levine, the Kenneth Burke Professor of English at Rutgers–New Brunswick, demonstrates in *Lifebirds* how his passion for birds has become a filter through which the passages of his life are reflected. In each chapter of this gently written book, his memories of encounters with different birds—swifts, cranes, swallows—trigger meditations on associated experiences—the falling away of a son, the return of a brother, the mistakes of a father. For this world-renowned scholar of Victorian literature and non-fiction prose, birds also offer the attraction that "they are precisely not texts. They resist the strategies of literary criticism and cultural analysis by flying past [my] life." Departing from the academic prose of his scholarly work, Levine paints gorgeous pictures of birds in the wild, of "banal" geese "exploding" off prairie flats "with the power and grace of eagles." Combining the sweep of nature writing with the poignancy of memoir, Levine's *Lifebirds* is a celebration of all that is both marvelous and ordinary about our lives.

LIFEBIRDS. BY GEORGE LEVINE (FAS-NB). WITH ORIGINAL LINE DRAWINGS BY MARGE LEVINE. 180 PP. NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ: RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS. HARDCOVER, \$24.95.



Art in Jersey City, Dodge went to pick up a painting from fellow Soviet art collector George Riabov (RC'51, GSNB'52), who was planning to give his collection to Rutgers. Riabov, suggesting that Dodge also consider Rutgers, introduced him to the Zimmerli Museum's director, P. Dennis Cate (RC'67). "Nancy and I had visited several universities around the country and the fit never seemed right," says Dodge. "I was tired of having to sell the damn thing. Dennis was articulate and knowledgeable, and I felt he could express the value of this collection better than I could." Soon after, Cate and the Dodges worked out an agreement, and \$1 million was raised toward renovating the Zimmerli's exhibition space to display the new holdings.

When Gorbachev came to power in 1986, the Dodges made the decision to end their 30 years of collecting. "It was a logical place to stop. It was evident that artists would be much freer," says Dodge, who has continued to "fill in the

gaps" over the last nine years. In 1988, a Sotheby's auction of official and unofficial Soviet art in Moscow changed the market forever. Works that had sold a few years before for under \$5,000 sold for 10 times that much. The auction escalated the value of the Dodge collection; many artists whose fortunes and reputations were made there are represented in it.

Dodge says he and Nancy will rest easier knowing the collection has a permanent home at Rutgers in a setting open to scholars, students, and the public. At the Zimmerli, the Dodge collection will be showcased in 10,000 square feet of gallery space. The inaugural exhibit, "From Gulag to Glasnost: Nonconformist Art from the Soviet Union," opens October 22. Next year, an international tour will take selections to Amsterdam, London, Paris, and possibly Tokyo. The Tretykov Gallery in Moscow and the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg have requested loans: They have little

of the previously outlawed art. Ironically, discussions are underway to exhibit the collection at the Smithsonian Institution, just 45 miles from Cremona Farm, where the art had long been stored and largely ignored.

This flurry of interest and activity affirms Dodge's premonition of a quarter century ago that the art would one day be of significant value and rewards his efforts to save it. Also recognized and honored are the many artists who put their lives on the line to express their feelings and beliefs. "Power exists only as long as people believe in it. It was the artists, the poets, the writers, and the musicians who stopped believing," Dodge says. "These artists, who will forever be seen at Rutgers, not only *exposed* cracks in the system but *made* cracks until, eventually, the whole system came tumbling down." □

Bill Glovin is the senior editor of Rutgers Magazine.

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