

New Capitalists Pillage Russian Art Treasures

Raisa Blankoff writes
from Moscow

When life in Russia was stable, so too was the security of its magnificent art treasures. But increasingly, church icons, historical letters and paintings are seen by corrupt officials, diplomats and caretakers as a ticket to personal riches. Gemini News reports how Chagalls and Kandinskys are fetching more than a million dollars in Japan and in North America in the great vanishing act.

Double Portrait with Glass of Wine by Russian artist Marc Chagall.

Chagall's paintings along with other priceless artworks are being stolen from Russia and sold abroad.

On getting an order from a buyer, the organiser gets the word to local suppliers. The conveyor — the only real risk-taker — has the job of getting the merchandise across borders. His charge is negotiable, according to the value.

The Russian Interior Ministry says there are 40 or so international art theft organisations. Most operate out of Germany, with headquarters in Berlin, or, less often, Cologne and Hamburg. Many are run by Russian émigrés.

They distribute the goods — icons, sculptures and antiques — to some 500 outlets across



Europe. Icons cracked or damaged in transit are sent to Italy for restoring by experts in Florence, Rome or Milan.

The most illustrious porters are diplomats. They are entitled to travel with up to six tons of personal effects, so anyone can find space for objects d'art for his own enjoyment or selling to third parties. In 1991, customs officials at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport made 41 seizures, worth 2.5 million roubles, among diplomats' luggage.

Russian military personnel are all customs-exempt and are known to have sent whole carloads in trains supplying

forces in Eastern Europe.

The *nesuni*, or porters, are nearly all people whose professional activities give them a special status under a law of 1953. In addition to diplomats, they include senior officers and their wives, people's deputies and members of the government.

There is no restricted circle. A Russian reporter has described how, to gain access to the VIP lounge and avoid customs, one need only pay a bribe and come with an authorisation signed by a vice-premier on behalf of a reputable organisation. In fact there are innumerable such

organisations. One starts with tins of caviar, and a year later it is a whole sturgeon. The weekly *Moscow News* says Russian customs officials will do a deal for \$150 to \$200. The most lucrative contraband goes out across the border at Shop in Ukraine and Brest in Belarus, in buses or articulated lorries.

There is also corruption at the top. Ministry of Culture officials having difficulty making ends meet are ready to fiddle inventories, and officials of the state archives can be found stealing letters of Catherine the Great and other irreplaceable historical documents.

Police and magistrates say they lack the weapons with which to stop the mounting tide. Half the Rublev, Aivazovsky and Serov masterpieces stolen from museums and converted into Panasonic, Sony or Sharp electronics, are never recovered.

Only a sixth of the contraband is recovered at the frontier. And while deputies were discussing remedies recently, a young investigator of the Ministry of the Interior, Anatoly Sviridenko, was mysteriously meeting his death beneath a train.

Unguarded museums and restored churches are an invitation to crime. Of 2,000 museums in Russia alone, more than half cannot afford alarm systems and must rely on the vigilance of custodians, often elderly *babushkas* dozing in their chairs.

Thefts from churches and private collections are often recorded without photographs or a proper description of the works. There is no complete catalogue of Russia's treasures, and often museums have no date inventory.

Thieves specialising in icons and liturgical objects face little or no deterrent. Only 300 of Russia's 9,000 restored churches have a security system. "Security depended on a system of social security that has vanished," says Tamara Poliakova, a Culture Ministry official. A new law is supposed to limit the haemorrhage, but like most others in recent months, it may never go into effect.

RAISA BLANKOFF is a Paris-based specialist documenting the traffic in stolen artworks and antiques.

The Lure of Coffee Houses in Vienna

by A Correspondent

A coffee-house in Vienna is a meeting-point, just as a *cha-ghar* in Dhaka. In the city of Vienna the traditional coffee-house has a long history which goes back to 1890. I would like to emphasise on the classical coffee-house atmosphere which is certainly different from what it is today. People who gossiped in coffee-houses before 1933 were different from those who sit in such places today. But coffee is definitely the "Volksseele" (soul of the people) in Vienna city just as beer in Bavaria (Germany), whisky in Scotland and wine in the Rhine region of Germany.

Talking about the coffee-house is talking about the history of literature in Vienna from 1890 till today. A coffee-house for the literary circle was named "Literaturcafe". It was a social gathering for the artists. Coffee was not the purpose, but a medium to achieve something. In the beginning of this century literary schools were born in such coffee-houses. New ideas in painting, music and architecture were born here. One of the famous coffee-houses is named Cafe Griensteidl. The well-known impressionist in German literature Arthur Schnitzler was a frequent visitor here. Many writers and authors were "Stammgäste" (regular visitors).

There were different types of coffee-houses in Vienna. Even the German writer Franz Kafka came to Vienna's coffee-houses from Prague. Vienna is also in proud possession of coffee-houses for politicians. It is said that every coffee-house had its regular visitors. A well-known coffee-house in the 50's was the famous Howelka. It was the centre of intellect and humour. In addition to that Vienna had the coffee-house Rebhuhn for journalists and

the musicians coffee-house was called "Parsifal". It is often said that without Cafe Griensteidl, the literature of Austria would have been incomplete.

But the story of a coffee-house is different today in Vienna. The number of coffee-houses is getting reduced. For the younger generation today the old coffee-houses are only nostalgic and literary names. In a world where everybody is moving so fast, time is a factor. The people of the late 20th century have no time to spare. But having enough leisure time is a precondition for a sound and healthy coffee-house culture. Earlier visitors of Vienna's coffee-houses were well-occupied. They sat in these places and wrote letters and composed poems. Visitors in such coffee-houses even received letters and could be contacted on telephone. The coffee-house was the place to meet friends and enemies. Visitors usually converted such coffee-houses into their homes. Their actual place of residence was only meant for sleeping at night.

But what is the situation today? The poet of today has his own typewriter, which he cannot carry to a coffee-house. A director of a television programme does not have time to sit in a coffee-house. He has his own office, a telephone and car of his own. The regular visitors of coffee-houses in the beginning of this century were poor and for them a coffee-house in Vienna was a necessity. Unfortunately for the poet today a coffee-house does not play any role in his life any more. Let us go back to the classical coffee-house atmosphere. It was often said that sitting in a coffee-house was like "to be not at home and also not in the fresh air". In a

coffee-house a visitor can do almost anything, but does not have to do almost anything at all — it is a place of freedom, freedom from the pressure of life. It is also a place of escape from the family, from women and also towards women. A classical coffee-house of Vienna was men's domain. The waiter of a coffee-house knew his regular visitors. He was like a teacher in the school. He used to look after the financial needs of his customers and also the "thirst for love". But today the waiter in a coffee-house does not have to quench the thirst for love of his visitors. This is no longer necessary because women also visit coffee-houses today.

A traditional coffee-house was a type of asylum for the helpless and to some extent a place of rescue and protection. "Cafe Atlantic" in Vienna was once a meeting-point for emigrants from Hungary.

A coffee-house in Vienna was known for its humour and its relaxed atmosphere. But unfortunately, many personalities like Anton Kuh, A Polgar or F Torberg who were regular visitors to coffee-houses till the late 20's were forced to live in exile in the 30's. Many of them did not return to the abode of peace and humour after 1945. Many Jews never returned to Vienna after the end of World War II.

But the coffee-house has a rich cultural tradition of Vienna. The knowledge which could be attained from a coffee-house is no more possible today. We all know that in the modern age information available in the television is second-hand. Without the existence of a coffee-house social life is missing. A coffee-house is a place for people who want to be alone, but also need a gathering or society in their state of loneliness.

Biography of Yves Saint Laurent

PARIS: Widely hailed as the king of haute couture, Yves Saint Laurent is now the subject of a candid new biography which juxtaposes his genius with an often tormented private life.

Saint Laurent and his associates, who cooperated with the author, are unhappy with the final product, which offers detailed accounts of the designer's homosexuality, his battles with depression and his problems with drugs and alcohol. The book, "Yves Saint Laurent," was written by Laurence Benaim, 31-year-old fashion editor of *Le Monde*, and published by Editions Grasset.

For the 472-page biography, Benaim was given full cooperation from the Saint Laurent fashion house, including access to company files, interviews with the couturier himself and introductions to many of his friends and associates.

"Yves Saint Laurent just started reading the book, and is not happy at all," said Christian Girard, secretary-general of the company and right-hand man to its president, Pierre Berge. "We are all quite disappointed, and Pierre Berge is particularly upset."

"I don't understand why they're upset," Benaim said in a telephone interview. "The house was friendly, gave me the run of their wonderfully organized archives, and helped me all the way for the two years it took to write the book."

However, Girard said, "We feel the book lacks depth, subtlety and clout on the cultural level." He said he thought that Benaim did not get to know Saint Laurent and his friends well enough, and contended the book was to "American" in its approach, pandering to a thirst for sensationalism.

Overall, however, the biography takes a serious, sometimes awe-struck approach to 57-year-old Yves Mathieu Saint Laurent, and his prodigious output since he first started designing for Christian Dior in the late 1950s.

His father was a businessman and his mother, Lucienne, a coquettish beauty interested in fashion.

simple and innocent, but I believe otherwise." While Mona remained stupefied, she began to sing the tune again.

Mona's confidence in her father's discretion wavered. But gradually as her mother-in-law went on taunting her, harping on the same theme, she perceived that the original animosity, the sense of her prestige being hurt, had worn off, and what remained in her taunt was not ridicule but a perverse kind of pastime for the old lady.

Tonight, as the rain kept on falling, Mona grew more restless, felt more lonely, and remained wide awake. She looked around the room, at the giant shadow of the closet, at the pile of ironed shirts and saris inside it, and her feeling was to be all by herself, and not to lose her nerves. She felt she belonged to the room, and then it suddenly occurred to her that the old lady had at last realised she was not helpless.

Saint Laurent remembers being unhappy at school and scorned by other children as a "sissy," but he already was interested in fashion, occasionally rifling his mother's wardrobe to tear up an old dress to make a

doll's outfit. Saint Laurent's progression from early interest in art up through the sensational collections at Dior in 1957-58 are well-chronicled, as are all his later designs.

Viewing Video

by Lenin Gani

SPEED is an action-thriller starring Keanu Reeves and Dennis Hooper. Reeves is part of an elite police squad who deals in high-risk situations. He and his partner (Jeff Daniels) foil a ransom attempt by the highly intelligent (Hooper). Hooper is understandably angered with them. Thus this is the way the rest of the film goes, with most of the actions taking place on an inter-state bus in which — you guessed it — a bomb has been placed to go off if the bus travels below 50 mph. Those of you who have seen *Demolition Man* (Stallone and Wesley Snipes) will recognise Stallone's sidekick in *Speed* as the reluctant bus driver. The movie is full of stunts and moves at a fast pace. Keanu Reeves has come a long way since the days of *Bull and Ted*, he has done *Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing* and Brian Stokes classic *Dracula*; his previous action film *Point Break* co-starred by Patrick Swayze.

Blown Away centres around the personal conflict between Jeff Bridges a bomb disposal expert and Tommy Lee Jones an Irish anarchist who makes a

daring escape from a maximum security prison somewhere in Northern Ireland and flees to Boston to destroy Bridges. Apparently, Bridges and Jones were best of friends during their time in Ireland. But one day a bomb (made by Jones) kills his sister and he is caught. Bridges then renounces violence and moves to America to start life afresh under a new identity. Everything goes well for Bridges (who is thinking of retiring) to settle down with his beautiful wife and daughter. However, the arrival of Jones upsets Bridges' plans.

With the use of carefully constructed devices Jones eliminates Bridges' colleagues. This forces Bridges to come out of his self-declared retirement so that he can track down Jones. His search ends in a fight to the death at Jones' hideout. Jeff Bridges' real father, the veteran actor Lloyd Bridges gives a good account during a few brief appearances. The action sequences are quite breathtaking.

For Hindi movie buffs the selection of the week is either *Vijaypath* or *Kranti Kshetra* with Mithun.

ENGLISH

NAME	TYPE	CAST
1. Wolf	(Thriller)	Jack Nicholson/ Michelle Pfeiffer
2. The Client	(Thriller)	Susan Sarandon/Tommy Lee Jones
3. Ultimate Desires	(Thriller)	Tracy Scoggins/ Marc Singer
4. Angels In The Outfield (Walt Disney)	(Children's)	Danny Glover
5. Speed	(Action)	Keanu Reeves/ Dennis Hooper
6. Son Busters	(Western)	Kris Kristofferson
7. The Lion King (Walt Disney)	(Cartoon)	
8. Blown Away	(Action)	Jeff Bridges/ Tommy Lee Jones

HINDI

NAME	TYPE	CAST
1. Kranti Kshetra	(Act/Thriller)	Mithun/Hari/Pooja Bhatt/Gautami/Shakti Kapoor/ Gulshan Grover
Di : Rajiv Kumar Mus : Nadeem Shrivani		
2. Chand Ka Tukda	(Rom/Mus)	Salman Khan/ Sridevi/ Anupam Kher/ Mehmood
Di : Sawan Kumar Mus : Mahesh Kishore		
3. Vijaypath	(Rom/Mus)	Ajay Devan/ Tabu Surjsh Oberoi/ Dunny
Dis : Farogh Siddique Mus : Anu Malik		
4. Naaraz	(Mafia)	Mithun/ Pooja Bhatt/ Atul Agnihotri/ Sonali/ Gulshan Grover
Di : Mahesh Bhatt Mus : Anu Malik		

Source : Film Fair Video and other clubs.

A New House

Continued from page 10

uded health. He sported a carefully trimmed small moustache. His hair — thick and cropped, ended where his deep-set neck started, sloping down to the round shoulders, that jutted out from his vest.

He was very fair complexioned like his mother. They — mother and son — resembled in many other ways, in their handsomeness and vigour, and also in their cruelty. Yakub's stay in the house over the weekend was as much a discomfort as a relief. Mother and son would have rows over the smallest of things. Materialistic as they were, a general care for property was what forged them together. Tea was introduced, but sugar was not, as 'gur', it's substitute, was cheaper. To Mona's utter dismay, Yakub concurred with his mother on this point. Soot rested in every corner in the kitchen, as three earthenware ovens burnt all day to feed the workers that worked in Yakub and his mother's fields. In the

afternoon, when the peasants came to eat, it was all smoke everywhere, and Mona's eyes got red and began watering. She sneezed. Yakub, like him mother, said, she would soon get over it. She did. Her eyes stopped sneezing, and she stopped sneezing. But, taking food on the floor was something she felt utterly unable to adjust to. She nauseated, while her mother's kitchen, with neatly arranged chairs and table, arose in her vision.

Yakub was free the entire Friday. Taking his bicycle out he scoured through the plains looking after the crops. It was a vast stretch of land they owned, with numerous trees and ponds. He beat up the workers regularly if he found them lazy. They feared Yakub's blows as much as they feared his mother's mouth.

While he remained in the house, Yakub's voice could be heard everywhere fussing over the smallest of matters. Mona, on the other hand, soon proved to be infinitely gifted

with that very carelessness which at once caused his promptings. He had inherited the 'vulture eyes' of his mother.

"Are you not happy here?" Yakub asked with a sharp look.

Confronted with a direct question like this, she couldn't hold herself any longer. She burst into a wild fit of sobbing. Her body waved. Yakub found himself surprised, and didn't know what to do, but as he lunged forward, Mona easily surrendered herself to him, her soft breasts kneading against his. As they tightly held each other, their knees plumped the softness of the mattress. In his deep tone, with his pronunciation faulting, he said, "As soon as I get settled I will find a house in the city and I will take you there." Mona was suddenly feeling bare, as Yakub gently laid her body, on the bed, full astride. He leaned over her, she felt all pleased, the vision of the pond, its water reflecting the opaque sky, crossed her mind, and so did that of the cart swivelling as it drove into the canal.

"Do you remember when with that very carelessness which at once caused his promptings. He had inherited the 'vulture eyes' of his mother."

"Are you not happy here?" Yakub asked with a sharp look.

was the last day?"

Yakub, exhausted, raised himself on his elbows, looked askance, drops of sweat still breaking on his forehead. He said, "Why, I do always circle your dates on the calendar. Here it is..." Swiftly turning himself over, he looked up in the calendar stuck to a nail on the wall, and then, in concern, said, "Why, didn't you have it last week?"

"No, I didn't," said she. "Then you have got it." While Yakub's practical mind turned to speculations of what he should ask her to do, Mona's feelings were a mixture of nervousness and glee, and uncertainty, she put her hands around Yakub, and cried once more.

Mona's days became long. The hot summer days passed, monsoon clouds covering the sky from end to end. Monju's second-son, found of his aunt from the city, often plucked mangoes for her. The fruits were of a green shade breaking into a yellow hue. They were sour, and not yet juicy. The gossiping women, as nothing escaped their eyes, noticed her taking mangoes, and finding a fresh topic now, speculated on it with redoubled energy. Mona became like a recluse, frightful, though Monju, probably instructed by the old woman, was on guard, watchful and affectionate, not even hating to scrub the dirt from the floor as she once or twice turned over whatever she ate.

One day, Monju took her on a short walk to the mango grove. As early evening set, releasing long shadows of the clouds. The trees were bereft of mangoes. The sun-scorched leaves spread a faint odour. The birds were not yet settled, and when Mona and her companion arrived there, they chirped and whirled, and still feeling more confused, they darted to and fro flapping their dappled wings. Everything was cooling down, Mona's inside felt wet, water forming under her tongue, and she remembered her mother, standing by the dining table, busy soaking mango-slices in vegetable oil to prepare a pickle.

"Money order, money order," the postman boomed at the front gate. Mona was about to take the path to the pond for a dip. She stopped, looked back to the door of the main house which opened on the frontyard. The burly figure of the postman could be seen. Yes, the money-order was from her father. She at once recognised the small ant-like letters of her father's handwriting on the counterfoil.

"Why money, ay, why money, after letters, now money, didn't I tell you ...?" her mother-in-law was scampering all around in the front-yard calling out to the neighbours, shouting, "See, see, the government officer has advertised his money. He has sent money for his daughter to suck pickle. Ah," she now turned to Mona, stared hard in her face, and then twisting her own face as if they were a pair of drums, and called out loudly in a vehement tone "Ay, how could you write for money when I have a barn full of rice, ponds full of fish and trees full of fruits?" Women and children who gathered in the yard laughed, giggled, shoved each other. She would like to go for it all. When Mona told her that she did not ask for money, but for pickle, and that since her mother was ill her father sent the money instead, she broke into a wild uncomprehending laughter, as if a witch had overpowered her. Then she bent her body further, began scampering again, sang out a rhyme, and as she was making a circle, women and children around her formed a ring. She then stopped the song. Exasperated and sweating, she called out again, "How strange! Is it the manners you learnt at the city? They all say, you are

Predilected Foibles

as a fake diabetic, and display my pill: use one pill and half sugar with each cup of tea. When the time for dessert comes, I wish others would not point out my pills. I tease my wife that taking sweets is a *sunnat*, and in a Muslim household, sweets should be available, on demand.

The Passing Show

Chuckles

Notebooks

SOMETIMES my own clumsiness surprises me. I still maintain so many notebooks that I need one extra notebook to keep an index of the other half a dozen pocket and diary-type table notebooks. I make an entry in the nearest notebook I find handy, then forget it went into which notebook. So I make a note on that note in another notebook as to where I had kept a certain entry. Then I cannot find this reminder note also.

Came the electronic age, and naturally I could not resist those cute electronic diaries. The first series I had to buy, but later, as I went up the professional ladder, these

have to replace the batteries more frequently than I use the keyboard.

I have been seduced away by another hobby, collecting pens. As a set of pens are brought into use, on rotation basis, about four times a year, I have to write something somewhere to shower equal affection on each pen in my pen-harem. Frankly the keyboards of the electronic diaries are too small for quick entries. The initial hurried entries (while on the move) are made in the pocket notebook, and later transferred to the electronic brother. The micro voice recorders have the same problem of transference to database. The latest DPAs (digital personal assistant) can automatically convert handwriting into stored text. I am now eyeing the tiny computer

"Notebooks", the laptops having gone out of date. A perfect secretary should be like the perfect butler: doesn't talk back, and is not permitted to display his feelings (latest news item: an Arab Sheikh has hired a butler at \$10,000 per month).

I would like to donate the one remaining electronic notebook to a suitable person, but the persons I short-listed feel rather uncertain of using one. I gave a new electronic notebook to my brother-in-law four years ago. He has stored it after trying it for a week. It looks like that to be gadget-minded, certain environmental conditioning is required.

To come back to the paper notebooks. This Boswellian habit crept up slowly and unobtrusively since the school days. Some of the free diaries my father received as complimentary copies trickled down to me, and I had to fill these inviting white pages with trash "memoirs", at an age, when, not to speak of the power of the pen, I was learning penmanship (remember the 'Longman's Copy Books') and other logistic problem. Several of the old diaries are half full or half empty. Spartan instincts mess up the old entries with the new, with several page markers sticking out to proclaim the year of entry. Every year I resolve to do some spring cleaning, but there is no spring season in Bangladesh. Meanwhile I treasure my liabilities.