

***Report: Faculty Seminar to Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan***

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My written notes are punctuated with small drawings. For the most part they are of buildings, details of interiors, statues, and works of art. A few are of people we met, but the mobility of humans made them difficult subjects. The drawings are really sketches made quickly, often while standing. What purpose did doing them serve? First of all, the process of sketching helped me to be attentive to my surroundings. Secondly, it enabled me to be actively engaged with new stimuli. In this report these sketches serve as clusters around which my impressions and thoughts are gathered.

*Portrait of Peter the Great* by Mihail Chemiakin, bronze, 1991, St. Petersburg. The large statue of a seated Peter is located within the walls of the Peter and Paul fortress, the physical birth- place of the city. There is something oddly grotesque about the statue. The small head fits uncomfortably on the oversized, angular body. Perhaps the artist's view of his country's history was shaped by his non-conformist attitudes, which led to his exile from the Soviet Union in 1971.

How the Russians negotiate their past is what impressed me the most during this part of our trip. This manifests itself in physical ways, for example, the luxury cars that are parked in front of restaurants and bars, and in symbolic ways, as in the inclusion of the Romanov family in the Peter and Paul Cathedral. More intangible than these examples is the way in which Russians declare the Soviet era a thing of the past and yet retain certain aspects of its system, most notably corruption. The rhetoric does not always match reality. Is the Russian educational system really superior to all others?

*Gilded decorative panel, Conference Room, European University.* The University is an independent graduate school that was formed in 1994 and opened in 1996. Financial

support was provided by the MacArthur and Ford Foundations and the Soros Foundation. The intention was to set new standards of education and training in Russia. The city provides the building, an eighteenth-century palace that retains some of its lavish decoration, yet is in need of restoration. We listened to two lectures, one on the media and the other on women's roles in Russia. Sergei Erofeev, Director of International Programs, spoke about media issues. According to him, the only source of media criticism is print, or newspapers. Only 22% of Russians use the internet. Anna Temkina, Co-Director of the Gender Studies Center, delivered a talk that outlined both the freedoms granted to and restrictions faced by Russian women since 1918. That was a year of transformation in gender relations. As workers women gained some emancipation from the family. The constitution granted women the right to vote, the right to abortion, to divorce, and equal pay. Professor Temkina acknowledged that this vision was not fully realized. In 1936 abortion was criminalized, then made legal again in 1955. From the 1950s until the 1980s women had an average of four abortions in their future.

*Looking out from the Hermitage onto Palace Square and the Alexander Column .*

The architecture of St. Petersburg is stunning with its endless combination of neo-classical elements and array of colors: pale creams, yellow ochers, crisp greens, and soft pinks. The Hermitage, with its bright turquoise, white, and gold palette is the most striking of all the palaces in the city.

I drew the square from the upper floor gallery where Matisse's *Dance* and *Music* hang. This visit confirmed my belief that you have to experience art works directly. Digital images and reproductions don't allow you to see how the canvas is worked and to imagine the intellectual deliberations and physical movements that went into realizing it. *Music* is filled with *pentimenti* that trace the changes Matisse made. Even hanging the work high in the stairway of Sergei Shchukin's Moscow mansion could not possibly have rendered these changes invisible or mitigated the crudeness of the work. More astonishing is to realize what an incredible art collector Shchukin was. The paintings by Picasso he owned, which are hanging in the Hermitage Museum, emphasize process rather than resolution.

I paid attention to both the works, which are spectacular, and the collectors. Catherine the Great had a voracious appetite for all art, which was a manner of rivaling European royals. The Hermitage also contains many works collected by other, lesser nobles. The dates of acquisition on the labels document the appropriation by the state in the 1920s. The many guides who take visitors through the Hermitage are not interested in these details. They have learned that anecdotes or tragedies, such as the attack on Rembrandt's *Prodigal Son*, keep their audience attentive. In contrast to the animated guides the women who "guard" the rooms are still and sometimes sleepy. They sit with their purses in their laps. Are there no lockers for them to use?

*Corot, Rainy Day*. The Almaty Art Museum. Provincial museums are often more interesting than larger museums because their collections are little known. The Corot painting I drew is probably known only to experts on the artist. I have never seen a reproduction of this sweet work. Nor are the social realists works housed here widely published. *Collective Farm's Feast* (1937) by the Kazakh artist Kasteev depicts a scene celebrating the harvest: work, dancing, eating. The Soviet flag sits atop the pole supporting a tent.

Almaty is a very different landscape than St. Petersburg. Gone is the neo-classical vocabulary and rococo colors. Here the buildings are more plain, Soviet block style, but with interesting decorative motifs that look Asian. Before independence, 60% of the population were Russians. While this has been reversed, schools teach mainly in Russian. There are, according to Dr. Dana Stevens of KIMEP, some 150 ethnic groups in the country. This diversity is displayed in the features of the population. The city is lively. There is evident of prosperity in the tall skyscrapers, the fancy cars, and the rich suburbs with McMansions that rival any in America.

According to Richmond alumnus Nazgul Yergalieva certain aspects of the former Soviet system persist. Two of these are the opacity of the legal system and the assumption of guilt. Punishment is assumed. Nazgul has worked on issues of torture in Central Asia. Torture is defined as an act by an official in power; the right to silence typical of common law societies is not in effect.

As with the European University and Smolny College in St. Petersburg, the Kazakhstan Institute of Management, Economics and Strategic Research, or KIMEP, is an attempt to create a model of higher education that is closer to western models. These experiments have quirky elements. KIMEP, for example, is a private university. The government, or the president, has a 40% share and Dr. Bang, the president of the university, owns the other 60%. One of the assumptions we have in America is that diplomas are awarded on the basis of performance, an idea that KIMEP promotes. However, this idea seems to be at odds with the general student culture. In Almaty at the Bilim/Education USA Center we met college students who asked how much American students had to pay for grades. Payment for acquiring jobs after university is also part of the professional infrastructure particularly in banking, business, and government.

*Student writing, Ber-Bulak Secondary School, Tash-Dobe Village, Kyrgystan.*

Francis Smith, a Peace Corps volunteer, was teaching English to a group of young students. Or rather, he was co-teaching with a woman who is responsible for communication in the Kyrgyz language. Working together facilitates the teaching process and allows the Kyrgyz teacher to learn about teaching English. Francis lives in the village with a family. He projects a mixture of idealism and acceptance of things as they are. Students are not penalized for not doing work; they always pass. He describes school as more of a social space than a working space. The boy I drew was intent on writing down the answer to the teachers' questions, but it is unlikely that he will continue his studies beyond high school. In fact, there are more girls in the class than boys because their parents claim the boys are needed to work. The girls are also unlikely to continue schooling. Francis explained that after high school the girls get married. By twenty-one they are considered old.

That same afternoon we were *fêted* at the International University where two academics participating in a conference lectured to us on the ecological problems of the Kyrgyz Republic. According to them, buried wastes from mining are a great concern because of the risk of leakage from potential earthquakes, mudslides, and other natural disasters. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the sites of waste tailings (uranium) have deteriorated. The problems facing the country are a lack of funds, qualitative

information, and lack of cooperation on a regional level. There was an underlying message here: the country needs aid from other countries like the United States.

The Kyrgyz Republic's lack of natural resources seems to have intensified its strong dependence upon the Soviet Union and its regret of the dissolution of the latter. Statues of Lenin, Marx and Engels in conversation, and other references to Communism are very visible. There are also signs of change. The statue of Marx and Engels faces the building that houses the American University of Central Asia, a liberal arts university founded in 1997 with funds from the U. S. government and the Open Society Institute founded by George Soros. In fact, the OSI cropped up in several discussions during our trip. It helped to fund the European University in St. Petersburg; Nazgul worked for the organization as well.

*Petroglyphs at Tamgaly, Kazakhstan.* This was an extraordinary experience because of the site, which was discovered only in 1957. The petroglyphs, most of which date from the Bronze Age (1400-1000 bce) are not in caves, but on rock faces that sit atop small hills in an open space. Representations of hunting figures, animals (including camels), sacrificial scenes, human couplings, and sun figures are scattered among different areas. They are small images made by a kind of stippling technique rather than carving. It is hard to see them sometimes because of the muted quality of the stippling and because of the sun. The most fascinating aspect is the ensemble: the petroglyphs, the place of sacrifice, and the tombs that are still being excavated. On the rocks above the place of sacrifice is a group of "solar-headed gods", anthropomorphic creatures with round heads that emit rays. On a tree branch jutting out from a crevasse in the rocks above the place of sacrifice hang strips of cloth. This branch and others scattered throughout the site are witnesses to the continued sacredness of the place for the local inhabitants.

## **Summary**

I cannot pretend to have understood everything I saw and heard, nor did I expect to after only a few weeks visiting three countries. As in most countries contradictions abounded. “Academics are free to publish what they want” one professor stated. The speaker at a different institution pointed to cases that demonstrated a limit to academic freedoms. These differing opinions may be due to fact that while the Russians, the Kazakhs, and the Kyrgyz people are capable of drawing a mental line between the Soviet and post-Soviet eras, attitudes and practices of the former spill over into the latter. The notion of paying bribes was deeply imbedded in Soviet life and has not been dislodged. The situation in all three countries is different, to be sure, and much more complex than this summary suggests.

## **General Outcomes of the Seminar**

The seminar was an extremely rich experience that helped me to begin to understand an area of the world I knew little about before. I began with a question; what kind of art do the oligarchs collect? Because of the readings done in preparation for the actual seminar trip, the encounters we had with people on the trip, and the discussions with Richmond colleagues, I was able to contextualize this one facet of post-Soviet culture that initially caught my attention.

In terms of my own teaching and research, I see two concrete outcomes. The first is the contribution to my knowledge of works of art that I have taught but never seen. This point is particularly relevant to my course on twentieth-century art, which examines the development of modern art in Russia in the teens and early twenties. Being able to appreciate the daring of Shchukin as a collector and the importance of his collection for avant-garde Russian artists was extremely valuable. Second, is the possibility of a course on the collection of and display of art from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries. Such a course may be taught as a study abroad course.