

# A Family's Story Parallels Russia's

By PETER TRIPPI



As its title suggests, the new exhibition *Kugach, Kugach, Kugach: Three Generations of Russian Artists* shines long-overdue light on realist painting as practiced in Moscow since the 1930s by seven members of the influential Kugach family. There is something meaningful in the fact that this innovative project will be seen only at The American University Museum (AUM) in Washington, DC. Now more than ever, university museums present important, hard-to-classify shows that larger institutions fear won't draw large crowds. And it certainly is timely to explore a seldom-glimpsed side of Russian culture just five miles from the U.S. Capitol. Not surprisingly, it took a nonprofit organization that promotes peace through greater understanding of foreign cultures, Global Arts Network, to gather the more than 80 paintings loaned for this presentation, which runs January 31-March 15.

Unlike their counterparts in the West, 20th-century Russian realist masters felt obliged to pass what they had learned down to their students, thereby keeping the tradition alive. AUM director-curator Jack Rasmussen finds it fascinating that Russia's realism has continued "to flourish, unapologetic and breathtakingly crafted, alongside the waves of avant-garde, dissident, and non-conformist art breaking against the country's official shores. In a way, Russians got to have their cake and eat it, too, as if Bouguereau and Cézanne were hanging together in the same Salon."

## CHIEFS OF THE CLAN

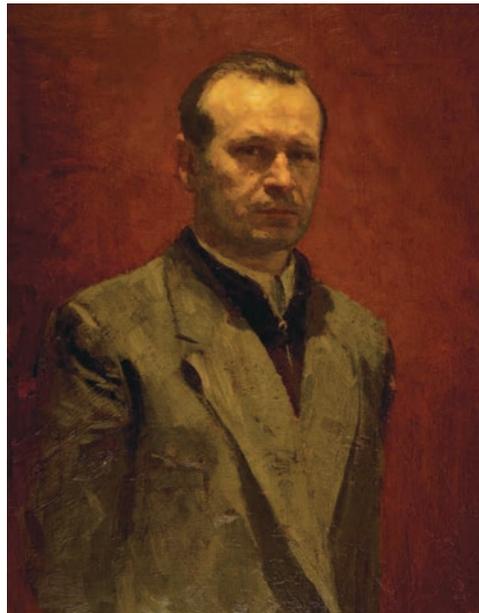
This exhibition centers on the 91-year-old patriarch, Yuri Petrovich Kugach (b. 1917) and his late wife Olga Grigoryevna Svetlichnaya (1915-1997). Each came to the capital

OLGA GRIGORYEVNA SVETLICHNAYA (1915-1997)

*STILL LIFE WITH APPLES*

1969, OIL ON CANVAS ON PANEL, 13 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> X 16 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION



YURI PETROVICH KUGACH (b. 1917)

*SELF PORTRAIT (DETAIL)*

1958, OIL ON CANVAS TRANSFERRED TO PANEL, 31 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> X 22 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

in the mid 1930s to attend the renowned Moscow Art Institute, still commonly called the Surikov after the great realist-teacher Vassili Surikov (1849-1916). Yuri and Olga married in 1937; six years later, their talents were perceived as so valuable that the Soviet government evacuated them with other leading artists to Uzbekistan to escape the Nazi onslaught. Then and later, Stalin encouraged such painters to make large genre scenes of Soviet culture as it *would* be — uplifting, utopian visions of common people. Even today, Yuri believes that "A real artist doesn't paint what he sees. He paints what he wants to see. Those who want to see dirt, see dirt. For me, the main thing is poetry. This is the essence of all my work." This is, of course, a very particular interpretation of realism, distinct from — yet as intellectually valid as — Paul Cadmus's cynical, clear-eyed scenes of New York life at the same historical moment.

Yuri taught at the Surikov from 1948 to 1951, then moved his family to the Tver region so that he could teach at the House of Artists of Russia. Artists have long painted





YURI PETROVICH KUGACH (B. 1917)  
*THOUGHTFUL WOMAN* (STUDY FOR *IN THE RECEPTION HALL OF M.I. KALENINA*)  
1956, OIL ON CANVAS ON PANEL, 15 1/4 X 11 1/2 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

NIKITA FEDOSOV (1939-1992)  
*NEAR THE WATER*  
1970, OIL ON PANEL, 10 1/8 X 19 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION





YURI PETROVICH KUGACH (b. 1917)  
**LILACS IN BLOOM**  
 1994, OIL ON PANEL, 23 1/2 X 23 1/2 IN.  
 COLLECTION JAMES YAROSH, NEW JERSEY

member of the Academy of Arts of the USSR, and he has enjoyed many accolades, exhibitions, publications, and museum acquisitions since then.

**THE LEGACY ENDURES**

Still painting at age 91, Yuri has lived to see his son Mikhail Kugach (b. 1939) achieve official success, too. Brought up among great artists, Mikhail and his cousin Nikita Fedosov (1939-1992) entered the competitive arena of Russian realism at age 10, when they matriculated at the Moscow Secondary Art School. This led to the requisite six years of study at the Surikov, where they succeeded brilliantly. Like his father before him, Mikhail Kugach has served as president of the Moscow River School and is a gifted teacher long active at the Surikov.

The realist painting gene has been passed down, fortunately. The AUM exhibition also includes canvases by Mikhail's daughter Ekaterina Kugach (b. 1965) and his son Ivan Kugach (b. 1972), both graduates of the Surikov. In addition, Mikhail's daughter-in-law Victoria Samsonova (b. 1975) is represented here.

Beyond providing visitors with a visually delightful experience, the Kugach exhibition reminds them that the sustenance of art depends as much on the human beings who make and collect it as on the grand ideals that inform it. It is particularly exciting to imagine what might cross the minds of at least a few students from

this area's scenic countryside, and Yuri and Olga followed suit. He recalls, however: "It was not just village life for me; it was the life of the Russian people." This inter-association of nationhood, a people, and their environments (both natural and built) is characteristically Russian, a powerful and unifying principle that does not fully translate in the U.S.

Yuri was typical in this regard, but unusual in his valuation of Olga's artistry as equal to, if not greater than, his own. He decided to play the political and marketing games necessary to advance his career and support their family, expressly so that his wife could focus on making great paintings without the usual pressures. Thus Yuri became prolific and widely recognized, while Olga worked slowly and painted fewer canvases. As a result, it is universally agreed in Russian art circles that one cannot find a weak picture by Olga, a claim the exhibition in Washington verifies.

As in the West, Russian realists experienced a diminishment of prestige from the early 1960s onward. Although avant-garde art was more conservative than in New York or Paris, its rise began to impact the scholarships, stipends, and commissions available to realists. In the 1970s they began to exhibit outside official circles, and in 1974 Yuri became a founding member and first president of the Moscow River School, which was steeped in the tradition. This does not mean he had fallen from official favor, however; the following year he was elected a full

The American University's art department next door: Russian realism *may* just take root in Washington, too. ■

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**Information:** The American University Museum, Katzen Arts Center, Ward Circle, 4400 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20016; 202.885.1300;



VICTORIA SAMSONOVA (b. 1975)  
**SPRING ON THE TERRACE**  
 2003, OIL ON CANVAS, 35 X 41 IN.  
 PRIVATE COLLECTION



YURI PETROVICH KUGACH (B. 1917)  
*Full Moon*  
2007, OIL ON PANEL, 19 1/2 X 27 1/4 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

YURI PETROVICH KUGACH (B. 1917)  
*Wood in Snow*  
1957, OIL ON PANEL, 13 1/2 X 19 1/2 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



OLGA GRIGORYEVNA SVETLICHNAYA (1915-1997)  
*The River*  
1958, OIL ON CANVAS, 18 5/16 X 23 3/8 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION