

From the Eastern Bloc to the Bronx: Early Acquisitions from The Art Collection

Reception and Curator's Talk: Sunday, May 19, 1:30–3 p.m.
Free and Open to the Public | R.S.V.P. 718.581.1596 or art@hebrewhome.org
On view May 5–August 25, 2019 in the Derfner Judaica Museum



Oscar Rabin (Russian, 1928–2018), *Cats Under Crescent Moon*, 1963, oil on canvas, 35 ½ x 43 ½ inches, Derfner Judaica Museum + The Art Collection, HHAR 1076

Derfner Judaica Museum + The Art Collection at Hebrew Home at Riverdale is pleased to announce its latest exhibition, *From the Eastern Bloc to the Bronx: Early Acquisitions from The Art Collection*, on view in the Derfner Judaica Museum from May 5–August 25, 2019. A reception and curator's talk will be held on Sunday, May 19, 2019, from 1:30–3 p.m. in the Museum, located at 5901 Palisade Avenue in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. This event is free and open to the public. R.S.V.P. 718.581.1596 or art@hebrewhome.org. Photo I.D. required for entry at all times.

The exhibition is part of the Derfner Judaica Museum's 10th Anniversary celebration, which will include several events and activities throughout the summer.

From the Eastern Bloc to the Bronx tells the fascinating story of how the Grosvenor Gallery in London promoted artists from Eastern Bloc countries and came to play a central role in shaping the Hebrew Home Art Collection. Some of the first works acquired for The Art Collection were by artists who were included in solo and group exhibitions at the Gallery, which was founded in 1960 by the American sociologist Eric Estorick (1913–1993). Estorick was instrumental in efforts by the Hebrew Home's former executive director Jacob Reingold (1916–1999), with the support of a few key donors, to establish The Art Collection in the 1970s. His gallery created a niche for the exhibition of Eastern Bloc artists in the 1960s when art from "behind the Iron Curtain" was largely unseen and unknown by Western audiences. Living and working during the height of the Cold War in the Soviet Socialist Republics of Armenia and Russia and satellite states Hungary and Czechoslovakia (today the Czech Republic and Slovak Republic), most of these artists were rarely, if ever, exhibited in the West.

This exhibition features works by 35 artists who participated in nine key exhibitions that took place at Grosvenor Gallery between 1961–1967, before the Hebrew Home began to acquire the artwork about a decade later. Today, some of these artists have well established reputations internationally or in their home countries, or both. For example, Soviet dissident artist Oscar Rabin (1928–2018), founder of the Nonconformist movement and exiled to Paris in 1978, has been the subject of several major exhibitions and a documentary film; eminent Slovak artist Vincent Hložník (1919–1997), founder of the highly influential Department of Graphic Art and Illustration at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bratislava, will have a major retrospective at the Danubiana Meulensteen Art Museum, Bratislava, Slovak Republic, in 2020; and the work of Mariam Aslamazian (1907–2006) is on permanent view at a museum in Gyumri, Armenia, dedicated to the artist and her sister.



Mariam Aslamazian (Armenian, 1907–2006), *Collective Farm Abundance*, 1962, oil on canvas, 34 x 54 inches, Derfner Judaica Museum + The Art Collection, HHAR 3009

Grosvenor Gallery's initial exhibition of Eastern Bloc artists, entitled *Lithographs by Twenty-seven Soviet Artists*, took place in 1961, and proved to be Estorick's first success in obtaining permission to export Soviet artwork to the West. The exhibition featured Russian printmakers from the Leningrad Experimental Graphics Laboratory (LEGL), a workshop that included master lithographers who used the medium to create intricate images with complex color palettes. Prints by ten artists from that show, Boris Ermolaev (1903–1982), Grigory Izrailevich (1924–1999), Anatoli Kaplan (1902–1980), Vera Matiukh (1910–2003), Gerta Nemenova (1905–1986), Alexander Shenderov (1897–1967), Mikhail Skouliari (1905–1985), Vladimir Sudakov (1912–1994), Alexander Vedernikov (1898–1975) and Alexandra Yakobson (1903–1966), are among the works later acquired for The Art Collection that are on view in the present exhibition. The London exhibition garnered enough commercial and critical success that it was remounted (with work by all but two of the original artists) in New York City later that same year. Subsequently, The Museum of Modern Art in New York acquired prints by five of the artists, including Ermolaev, Kaplan, Nemenova, Shenderov and Vedernikov.

Following the LEGL exhibition, Estorick mounted a large solo show of Kaplan at the end of 1961 entitled *Anatoli Kaplan: The World of Sholem Aleichem and Other Scenes, Tales and Songs of Russian Provincial Life*, which included 131 prints. Kaplan worked almost exclusively on Jewish themes and was widely collected both privately and by museums, including The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in the 1960s. He was of particular interest to Estorick, who expanded some of his print editions exclusively for Grosvenor Gallery, including *The Little Goat* (1958–1961), a song from the Passover liturgy. Two of *The Little Goat* prints and three of his other lithographs are on view in the current exhibition. Six portfolios of different print series by Kaplan along with four paintings by the Russian Jewish painter Solomon Gershov (1906–1989), who appeared in a two-person exhibition with Kaplan in 1967, were the first works acquired by Hebrew Home from Grosvenor Gallery in 1975. These selections likely reflected Estorick's and Reingold's shared interest in promoting Jewish artists working under oppressive conditions.



Anatoli Kaplan (Russian, 1902–1980), *Dedication Page*, from *The Little Goat*, 1961, lithograph, 24 1/2 x 18 1/2 inches, Derfner Judaica Museum + The Art Collection, HHAR 285



Richard Fremund (Czech, 1928–1969), *Easter Landscape (Velikonocni Krajina)*, 1963, oil on canvas, 35 x 45 1/2 inches, Derfner Judaica Museum + The Art Collection, HHAR 1276

The Gallery held a major retrospective of the master Russian printmaker Vladimir Favorsky (1886–1964) in 1962. Titled *Favorsky*, it included linocut prints from the artist's *Samarkand* series (1942–1944) realized during the artist's evacuation to Uzbekistan during World War II, among other works from his long career. Three of these rare prints on view depict scenes from everyday life of the Uzbek people among their caravans and camels.

The Gallery celebrated its move to a larger space in 1963 with the group show, *First Image: Painting and Sculpture by Artists of the Gallery*, which included Czech artist Richard Fremund (1928–1969), who is represented in the current exhibition by two abstract

townscape paintings, *Easter Landscape* (1963) and *Blue Landscape* (1957). Today, Fremund is frequently shown in galleries in the Czech Republic and his paintings held in private collections. Also included in *First Image* were Hungarian artists Gyula Konfár (1933–2008) and Mihály Schéner (1923–2009), who went on to have a two-person exhibition the following year. *Gyula Konfár, Mihály Schéner: Two Contemporary Hungarian Artists*, mounted in 1964, featured 52 paintings. Two works from that show were later acquired for The Art Collection and are included in the present exhibition: Konfár's *White Cottages, Red Roofs* and Schéner's *Self-Portrait at Work*, both from 1964, which share a dark, expressionistic style.



Mihály Schéner (Hungarian, 1923–2009), *Self-Portrait at Work*, 1964, oil on board, 27 3/4 x 39 1/2 inches, Derfner Judaica Museum + The Art Collection, HHAR 2994

One of Estorick's most important exhibitions was *Aspects of Contemporary Soviet Art*, mounted in 1964, which featured paintings and works on paper. Estorick managed a cultural coup by obtaining permission to export paintings and drawings from the Soviet Union, a task with far greater obstacles than exporting lithographs as he had in 1961. As British art critic Nigel Gosling wrote for *The Observer* in 1964: "The show is a milestone. For the first time in 40 years Soviet paintings are exhibited for sale outside Russia." The Hebrew Home owns 19 of the paintings that were included in *Aspects of Contemporary Soviet Art*, with selected works on view by Aslamazian, Alexander Dubinchik (1922–1997), Irina Fateeva (1908–1981), Moisey Feigen (1904–2008), Vladimir Gavrillov (1923–1970), Vladimir Gedikyan (b. 1928), Grigoriev (dates unknown), Mikhail Ivanov (1926–2000), Pavel Kuznetsov (1878–1968), Alexey Morosov (1896–1965), Anatoli Nikitch (1918–1994), Pyotr Ossovsky (1925–2015), Albert Papikian (1926–1997), Alexsei Pisarev (1909–1970), Igor Popov (1927–1999), Peter Shlikov (1917–1920), Galina Solovieva (1908–1984) and Leonid Zakharov (1928–1986).



Vincent Hložník (Slovak, 1919–1997), *Untitled*, from *Dreams*, 1962, linocut, 23 5/8 x 16 3/8 inches, Derfner Judaica Museum + The Art Collection, HHAR 1407

Turning to Czechoslovak art, *Vincent Hložník* was a major solo show comprising paintings and graphics mounted in 1965. Hložník is represented in this exhibition by two linocuts from the series *Dreams* (1962), a cycle of surrealistic prints that caution about the horrors of war. While a student in Prague, he was present when the Germans occupied the city in 1939 and was dramatically impacted by the atrocities he witnessed. Hložník left a lasting legacy through his students and his humanistic approach to art continues to influence generations of Slovak graphic artists today. His work is on permanent view in galleries and museums in the Slovak Republic.

Rabin, founder of the Nonconformist movement in Moscow in the 1970s and a major international artist today, had his first solo exhibition in the West at Grosvenor Gallery in 1965. The two paintings that represent him in this exhibition, *Cats Under Crescent Moon* (1963) and *Bread and Factory* (1964), were included in the original Grosvenor show. Rabin was an organizer of the infamous "bulldozer exhibition" held outside Moscow in 1974. In an incident that became widely reported internationally, dissident artists who were

prohibited from participating in official galleries mounted an exhibition in an empty lot that was brutally shut down by the Soviet authorities with water cannons and bulldozers. Exiled four years later and prevented from returning from a visit to Paris, where he remained until his death in 2018, Rabin and his family were abruptly stripped of their Soviet citizenship. His work is widely collected and held in both private and public collections, including the Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, New Jersey, The Centre Pompidou, Paris, and The Kolodzei Collection, Highland Park, New Jersey, among others.

One of the last exhibitions focused exclusively on Soviet Bloc artists, *The World of Sholem Aleichem: Kaplan lithographs, Gershov paintings*, was presented in 1967. It featured Kaplan's portfolios alongside Gershov's paintings. Gershov painted in an expressionistic style, often on Jewish themes, and was critical of Soviet art policies. He suffered harsh consequences for his views and was arrested twice, once in 1932 and again in 1948, and sent to the Gulag after having his work destroyed. He is represented by the painting *Tevye* (ca. 1963–64), an imaginary portrait of the protagonist of Aleichem's series of short stories, *Tevye the Milkman*.

This exhibition highlights rare artworks in the Hebrew Home's Art Collection, which has attracted researchers, curators and dignitaries from around the world, and also provides a fascinating glimpse into the modern art being created during the Cold War in the Eastern Bloc and how it was brought to the West's attention by Eric Estorick. The Grosvenor Gallery's focus on exhibitions of Eastern Bloc artists was concentrated in the period 1961–1967, according to the Gallery's available records, and coincided with an ambitious general program of a dozen or more exhibitions each year. During this same period, the Gallery organized at least 80 or more exhibitions by other artists, mostly from Western Europe, in solo and group exhibitions. While he moved his focus away from Soviet Bloc artists after 1967, Estorick continued to include some



Solomon Gershov (Russian, 1906–1989), *Tevye*, ca. 1963–1964, oil on canvas, 25 x 26 1/2 inches, HHAR 40

of these artists in other broader, thematic group shows. Many works by Eastern Bloc artists remained in Gallery inventory beyond these critical years in the early to mid-1960s and were thus available for the Hebrew Home to acquire in the 1970s. Although Estorick died in 1993, the Grosvenor Gallery remains active in London to this day.

About Hebrew Home at Riverdale

As a member of the American Alliance of Museums, the Hebrew Home at Riverdale by RiverSpring Health is committed to publicly exhibiting its art collection throughout its 32-acre campus, including the Derfner Judaica Museum and a sculpture garden overlooking the Hudson River and Palisades. Now in its 10th year, the Derfner Judaica Museum first opened its doors in the recently completed Jacob Reingold Pavilion at the Hebrew Home campus in 2009. Originally founded as The Judaica Museum in 1982, it was renamed that year in honor of benefactors Helen and Harold Derfner and formally merged with The Art Collection. The Derfner Judaica Museum + The Art Collection provides educational and cultural programming for residents of the Hebrew Home, their families and the general public from throughout New York City, its surrounding suburbs and visitors from elsewhere. RiverSpring Health is a nonprofit, non-sectarian geriatric organization serving more than 18,000 older adults in greater New York through its resources and community service programs. Museum hours: Sunday–Thursday, 10:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. Art Collection and grounds open daily, 10:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m. Call 718.581.1596 for holiday hours and to schedule group tours, or for further information, visit our website at RiverSpringHealth.org/art



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