



RABIN

Grosvenor Gallery



First one man exhibition by the Russian painter

Oskar Rabin

paintings 1956-1965

10 June - 3 July 1965

Grosvenor Gallery

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This is the seventh exhibition of Russian art at the Grosvenor Gallery since Spring 1961; beginning with *Lithographs by Twenty Seven Soviet Artists* from the Leningrad Experimental Laboratory, followed by a one-man exhibition of a member of that group, Anatoli Kaplan. In 1962 an exhibition entitled *Two Decades of Experiment in Russian Art (1902-1922)* surveyed through works by eight masters Russian art from the beginning of the 20th century up to the great change in Soviet art policy, and the birth of Socialist realism. This was followed by a retrospective exhibition of the graphic work of Vladimir Favorsky, spanning the period 1912-1960. In June 1964 *Aspects of Contemporary Soviet Art*, the first commercial exhibition of Russian art in the West since 1922, was held in the new, enlarged quarters of the Grosvenor Gallery. This year, in concurrent exhibitions on the "Russianness" of Russian art, exhibitions were held of Chagall's graphics, and drawings for sculpture and a handful of bronze maquettes by Ernst Neizvestny. Up to the present time the principle underlying these exhibitions has been to follow a group show by one-man exhibitions, with the purpose of setting off the talents of artists who have been especially praised by the critics. Thus, in the four year period, the Gallery has moved from the exhibition of lithographs in artists' proof copies and, subsequently, specially produced limited editions for the Grosvenor Gallery, to watercolours, drawings, paintings, and now this first full one-man exhibition of a leading, young Russian painter. We have yet to mount a full-blown sculpture exhibition. The Grosvenor Gallery also looks forward to a major exhibition of Russian art of the 20th century.

Eric Estorick

The artist with his family in Lianozovo, outside Moscow



Photograph: Ida Kar

Oskar Rabin is 37. He is lean and his glance is intense. Glasses hide the laughter lines around his eyes and the look of severity is increased by a neat moustache and a close-shaven head. He thinks of himself as a realist because he fills his canvases with scenes from the world around him, but what he sees there is strictly individual and his way of painting what he sees is all his own.

The story of his life is simple and he tells it calmly, looking fondly back on the things that meant much to him and shrugging off the unpleasantnesses with the composure of an observer rather than the stoicism of a participant. Oskar was born on 2nd January, 1928, the only child of professional parents, both practising Moscow doctors. His father died when he was five and when he was eleven his mother insisted that he enter a music school. He studied the violin there for three years because he had to, but at the same time, and just because he wanted to, he attended drawing classes and learned how to tackle a still life.

At home he worked on different lines, copying picture postcards. One of the first of his own pictures to fill him with a real sense of achievement depicted the moon shining down on to dark houses with their windows all aglow. The original postcard was a German one which looked like any other until you held it up to the light when the moon and the windows lit up like real ones. Rabin is still at his happiest with this theme and says he find great pleasure in moonlight and the contrasting warmth of human windows. Walking home in the evening he is sensitive to the difference between the friendly light in the windows of his own home and the mysterious lights which belong to people he doesn't know. Apart from the pictures on the postcards, the boy had a much-loved book of paintings by Mikhail Vrubel. The romantic images appealed strongly to him and he copied the devils and mermaids and sprites of the Russian forest as well as he could. Much later when he saw the originals he was happy to meet old friends, but the witchcraft had left them and they did not affect him so deeply as the reproductions had done. Visits to the Tretyakov Gallery

introduced him to other artists whose works impressed him too; Nesterov's fairy-tale pictures with slender birches and gentle-faced nuns on the high river banks, Levitan's and Savrasov's landscapes and the quiet sympathy with which Shishkin treated his forest subjects. Rabin comments, 'I still love those artists even now, when I know more of the world of art than I did then'.

Although the music lessons were brought to an end by the outbreak of war, the drawing classes continued. Rabin's mother died when he was fourteen but about this time he was befriended by the old artist and art master, Yevgeni Kropivnitsky, and he began to learn much that was new to him. He discovered what he had begun to suspect from his study of Vrubel, that a painting had life apart from the object it represented, that he had been right in his enjoyment of darkness and lighted windows, that lines and masses had value and that colour and texture were waiting for him to explore them. He painted more boldly and vividly and appreciated the roughness of coarse canvas and the lumpy surfaces he got by painting over other thickly painted pictures.

Rabin's mother had come from Latvia and it was to her sister in Riga that Rabin went when the war ended. He spent the next three years at the Riga Academy of Art, enjoying the freedom to paint whatever he wished. The influence of late 19th century European art was still strong here and even the work of Rabin's favourite teacher was undoubtedly reminiscent of the French impressionists. Professor Leo Svemp's tall, lean figure usually passed silently between the easels. His advice took the form of two or three deft finger strokes more often than spoken words - but he could speak and when he launched out on the subject of paintings everyone stopped work to listen. Svemp is at present chairman of the Latvian Union of Artists.

Rabin's return to Moscow was unexpected, but in the middle of the academic year he went to the director of the Surikov Art Institute, Sergei Gerasimov, to ask for a place. He was accepted, but Rabin still remembers the conversation they

had - 'I told him I couldn't draw and he replied that I painted well and that they could teach me to draw.' As it happened the teaching methods at the Institute had recently been changed to tally with those practised before the revolution and drawing was considered of prime importance. 'By this time' Rabin told me, 'I was used to a much freer way of presenting what I saw and I felt awkward and shy. I left the Institute altogether after a year and they gave me a certificate saying: "Drawing - fair, Painting - fair, Theory - not examined; dismissed for irregular attendance"'. Quite suddenly the young man was having to fend for himself. Moral support and help with his painting was there for the asking from his old friend and teacher, Kropivnitsky, but the practical advantages of being a student with a grant and hostel accommodation were gone for good. Rabin realised he was untrained for any job and was glad to sign on as a loader of goods trucks in a railway yard. He became a foreman and worked on the railways for eight years. His spare time was spent in painting, still encouraged by Kropivnitsky. He married the old man's daughter, Valentina, who was in fact the only member of the Kropivnitsky family who had yet to become an artist. In 1950 their own daughter, Katya, was born and her brother, Sasha, four years later. It was not until 1956 that Rabin ceased painting from models and began to rely on his memory, but when he did so he found a greater freedom and a new satisfaction in his work. There were on the other hand limitations. He confesses to having a poor visual memory and this means that the pool of subjects upon which he can draw can only include things which at the time moved him deeply enough to make a lasting impression, or those everyday things which surround him in ordinary life. For many years his suburban home was a long, single-storey building. It was in fact divided inside into cottages, but the outside presented a single uniform face to the world. His window looked out on to just such another long, low building. Some years it was repainted, turning from yellow to pink, or back again to yellow. This house appears in many of Rabin's paintings, sometimes yellow and

sometimes pink and sometimes colourless and grey in the evening light but with the windows brightly lit. On the snow-covered roofs stand gaunt television aerials and smoke rises from the chimney pots. The scene is usually set in winter or in the watery thaw of early spring, for the simple reason that in summer the thick leaves of the trees in front of the windows hide the view of the house almost completely.

Apart from the lighted windows, there are other recurrent topics in Rabin's paintings. He describes them: 'Every day for eight years I saw the railway and the trucks and not only saw them but handled them and loaded them and directed the loading. The theme of the overhead wires of the electric trains, the points lever and the trucks often came into the pictures I was painting at that time. And there were masses of cats in the village where I lived. We had a big tabby that we were very fond of too, and whenever I could fit him or some of the other cats into a picture, I did. They varied a lot in appearance in the pictures. Sometimes they looked more like devils than anything else, sometimes they looked like the lever that changes the railway points, sometimes they looked like curly signatures. . . .'

In 1956 Rabin entered a number of competitions 'for young artists' (under 35). One of his canvases was selected for the International Youth Festival Exhibition held the following year in Moscow and earned him a diploma of honour. This is still the only time he has been shown in the USSR. Early on little Katya showed signs of following in her father's footsteps but her enthusiasm waned and she became an interested spectator. Sasha has no time for art. He prefers wrestling and chess.

The railway themes died out of Rabin's paintings after 1959 because he changed his job in the goods yard for one in a decor and display studio. His regular work includes poster and advertisement designs and plans for window displays and exhibition layouts. He helped design the displays of the recent Soviet exhibitions in New York and London.

His commercial work leaves him as full of energy for his

spare time painting as before. His choice of subject is wider. It is usually Moscow, sometimes old and sometimes new, but occasionally he looks further afield to cities he has never visited. He has read of London and Paris and New York and seen countless pictures of them but still his interpretation is his own and he admits he would rather gain his impressions from written descriptions than from photographs or other people's pictures. Because his palette includes much grey and sombre greens and blues and black, Rabin is often described as gloomy. He explains with a wry smile, 'One can even feel gloomy on a sunny day in a beautiful birchwood. I don't see the life around me any more gloomily than anyone else, I simply have a melancholy soul. Good paintings must be honest and you have to leave a little bit of yourself, of your own soul, in each of them'.

Recently Rabin has returned to the still lifes of his early classes, but they have changed much in twenty years and bear his own strong stamp. Just as the houses he paints are always more than simple bricks and mortar, and have the life of homes about them, although their inhabitants are seldom to be seen, so the bread, the bottles and the kettle all belong to living people. They have been left where they are for a minute or two, still warm from the touch of human hands and Rabin is richly delighted to find them so. He loves the ordinary things in every home and the way in which they never appear quite the same. He gives a hint of where his work will take him in the future—'More and more I enjoy painting old Russian objects, samovars, icons and oil lamps. I love old Russian architecture and the ample shapes of the ancient churches. At the same time I find prefabricated buildings in my newest pictures, great white blocks with neat, square windows. We are soon to move into a flat in a building like these and I expect the long low house where we spent 13 years will soon be forgotten'.

Everyone admits that after seeing just a few of Rabin's

paintings, you would never confuse them with any other artist's. Many are certainly not what you would ordinarily choose to decorate your own home—but however unpromising they appear at first, they seem all to have remarkable attraction which so increases with acquaintance that it becomes extremely painful to part with a painting you have learned to love. This quality even exerts its pull upon people who frankly dislike his style, his subjects or indeed anything on canvas which is less than 150 years old. His pictures can be seen in many Moscow homes now and foreigners who have spent a year or two in Russia as diplomats or newspaper correspondents frequently take a Rabin painting with them when they leave, pleased to own such a special souvenir. Some have even returned to Moscow, taken back by people on a second tour of duty.

The paintings are more travelled than the artist, but word of them both has spread since 21st February, 1961, when Rabin's *Portrait of an Artist* was reproduced in *The Observer* without mentioning his name. Since then and especially after the 1964 exhibition at the Grosvenor Gallery his name has appeared in the Western press.

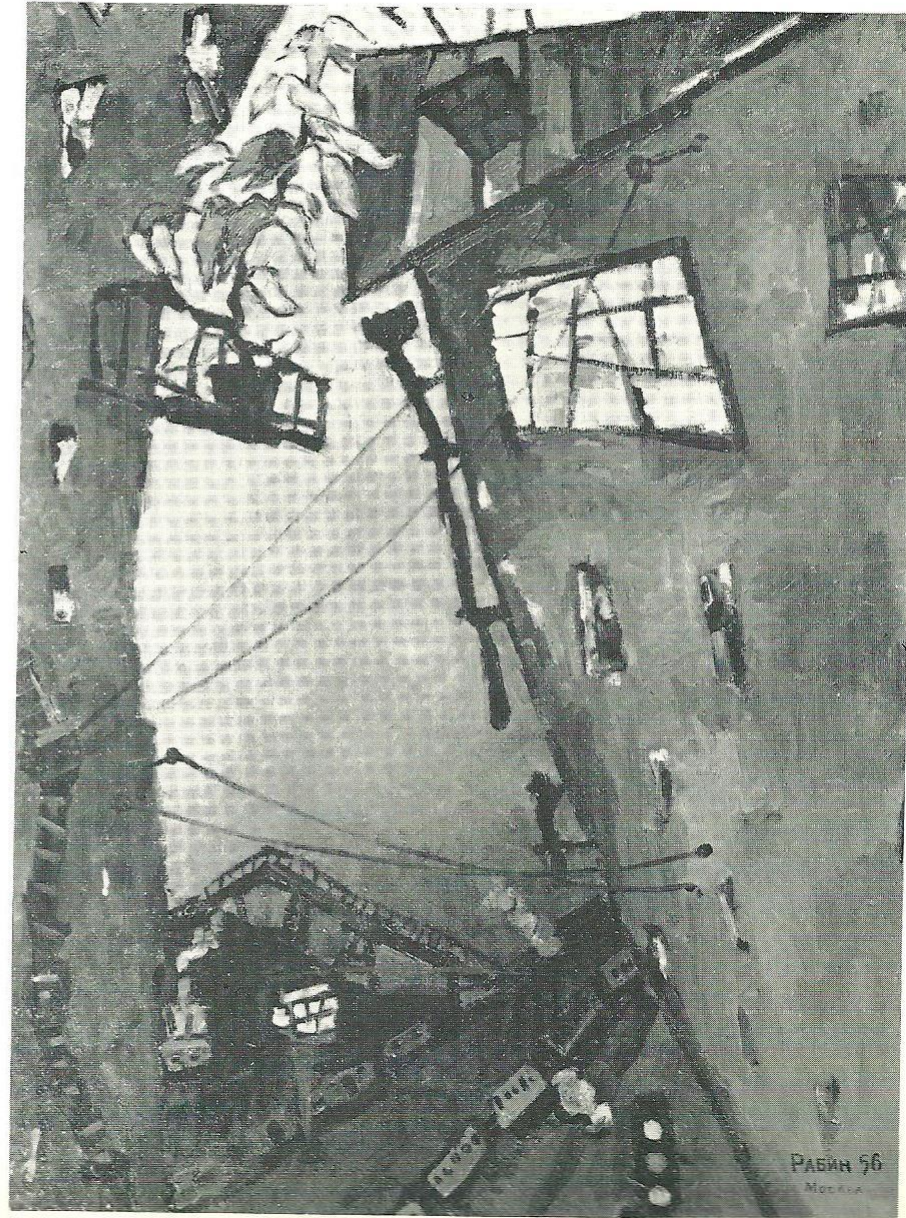
Rabin is reticent in talking about modern Western art. 'I know the work of contemporary Western artists only slightly, much as it interests me', he says. 'I am always afraid I might get a lasting and incorrect impression of a particular artist or group of artists just from the reproductions I see here. I would like to see the originals and then I could talk about them'.

Among modern Soviet artists he most enjoys 'Korzhev because of his search for colour, Tyshler, Pavel Kuznetsov, our famous graphic artist—Favorsky and of course that grand old man, Konenkov'.

Jennifer Louis
Moscow
April, 1965

Oil on canvas			ins			ins
1	Small Plant	1956	35 × 25 $\frac{3}{4}$	18	Ikon and Traffic Signal	1961 39 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 31 $\frac{1}{2}$
2	Night	1957	24 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 33 $\frac{1}{2}$	19	Bath No. 21	1961 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 31 $\frac{1}{2}$
3	A Grottesque	1957	27 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 35 $\frac{1}{4}$	20	Urban Landscape	1961 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 39 $\frac{1}{2}$
4	Electrical Pylons	1957	30 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 43	21	Goods Wagon and Broken Bottles	1961 27 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 35 $\frac{1}{2}$
5	Tinned Cutlets in Tomato Sauce	1957	26 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 20	22	Foolish Kittens	1961 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 31 $\frac{1}{2}$
6	Bulldozer	1958	29 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 22	23	City of Paris	1961 27 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 35 $\frac{1}{4}$
7	Signal Box	1958	31 × 43	24	Cat on Level Crossing	1962 19 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 27 $\frac{3}{4}$
8	Urban Landscape	1958	27 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 33 $\frac{1}{2}$	25	Georgia I	1962 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 19 $\frac{3}{4}$
9	Goods Wagon	1958	21 × 28 $\frac{1}{2}$	26	Moscow Priests	1962 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 35 $\frac{1}{2}$
10	Club No. 24 Comrades Court	1959	31 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 35 $\frac{1}{2}$	27	London	1962 39 × 31 $\frac{1}{2}$
11	Benzine Shop	1959	31 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 35 $\frac{1}{2}$	28	Towns and Moons	1962 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 43
12	Lianozovo	1959	27 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 35 $\frac{1}{2}$	29	Study of a Cat	1962 35 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 42
13	Winter Landscape	1959	23 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 30 $\frac{1}{2}$	30	Overhead Cables	1962 36 × 43
14	Laundry	1959	23 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 27 $\frac{1}{2}$	31	America 1	1962 31 × 39 $\frac{1}{2}$
15	Lianozovo	1960	19 $\frac{3}{4}$ × 27 $\frac{1}{2}$	32	Notre Dame de Lianozovo	1962 31 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 39
16	House, Ikon and Cat	1960-61	31 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 43 $\frac{1}{4}$	33	Landscape with Cats	1962 40 × 32
17	Traffic Signal and Landscape	1961	25 $\frac{1}{4}$ × 31 $\frac{3}{4}$	34	Railway Lantern II	1962 32 × 40
				35	Moscow Trubnaya II	1962 39 $\frac{1}{2}$ × 31 $\frac{1}{2}$

			ins				ins
36	Kingdom of Lianozovo	1962	$35\frac{1}{2} \times 27\frac{1}{2}$	54	Apocalypse	1963	36 × 44
37	Barracks	1962	$19\frac{3}{4} \times 27\frac{1}{2}$	55	Self Portrait by Window	1963	27 × 36
38	Lianozovo—House No. 13	1962	20 × 28	56	Moscow Street No. 150	1963	$35\frac{1}{2} \times 43\frac{1}{2}$
39	Moon and Sun	1962	36 × 27	57	Stolichnaya Vodka	1964	43 × 32
40	Cat under the Moon	1963	$31\frac{1}{2} \times 24$	58	Old Kettle	1964	$23\frac{3}{4} \times 35$
41	Foolish Cats	1963	20 × 28	59	Moscow in 1950	1964	35 × 27
42	Cat and Rope	1963	$20 \times 27\frac{3}{4}$	60	Derelict Building	1964	$27\frac{1}{2} \times 35\frac{1}{2}$
43	Small House and Factory	1963	$24 \times 31\frac{3}{4}$	61	A Wall in Priluki	1964	$27\frac{1}{2} \times 35\frac{1}{2}$
44	Still Life with Inverted Icon	1963	$35\frac{1}{2} \times 27\frac{1}{2}$	62	Apartment Blocks	1964	$14\frac{1}{2} \times 27\frac{3}{4}$
45	Russian Pop Art	1963	$27\frac{1}{2} \times 35\frac{1}{4}$	63	Herrings on the Wall	1964	$35\frac{1}{4} \times 27$
46	A Two-storey Barrack	1963	$43 \times 33\frac{1}{2}$	64	Holy Shrine of St. Catherine	1964	$31\frac{3}{4} \times 24$
47	Three Roofs	1963	35 × 43	65	The Artist's Wife as Queen of Clubs	1964	$39 \times 27\frac{1}{2}$
48	Rebuilding of Moscow II	1963	32 × 39	66	Bread and Factory	1964	$27\frac{3}{4} \times 39$
49	At the Grave of Sidor Polikarpovich	1963	$35\frac{1}{2} \times 43$	67	Red Barrels	1964	$27\frac{1}{2} \times 39$
50	Kittens	1963	$35\frac{1}{2} \times 43$	68	Large Soup Pot	1965	24 × 31
51	Supper by Candlelight	1963	$31\frac{3}{4} \times 39\frac{1}{2}$	69	Christmas in Khimkah-Khovrino	1965	21 × 39
52	Bottles	1963	$31\frac{1}{2} \times 39$	70	The Church in Bogoroditsa on the Nerli	1965	35 × 24
53	In memory of John Kennedy	1963	$31\frac{1}{2} \times 24$				

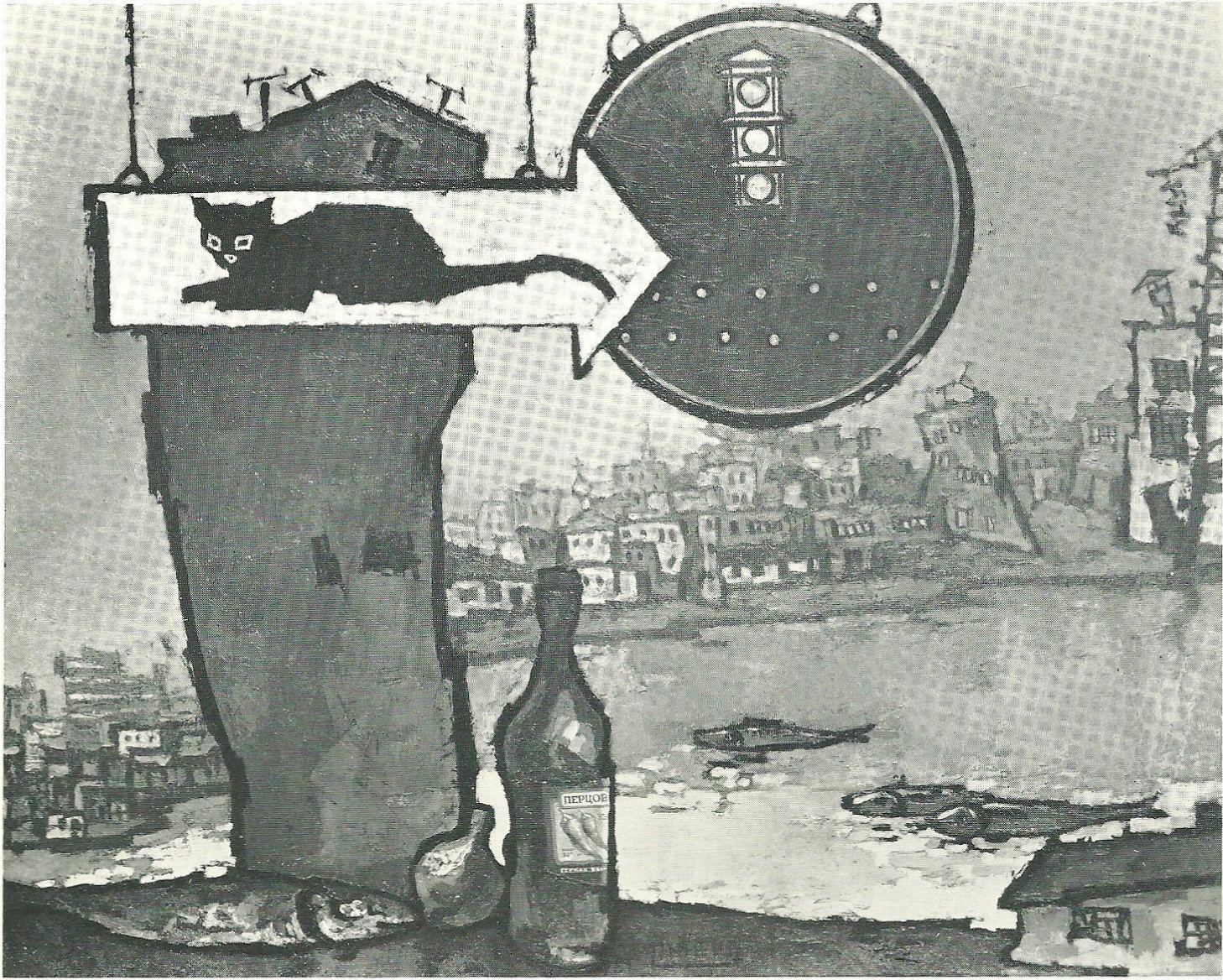






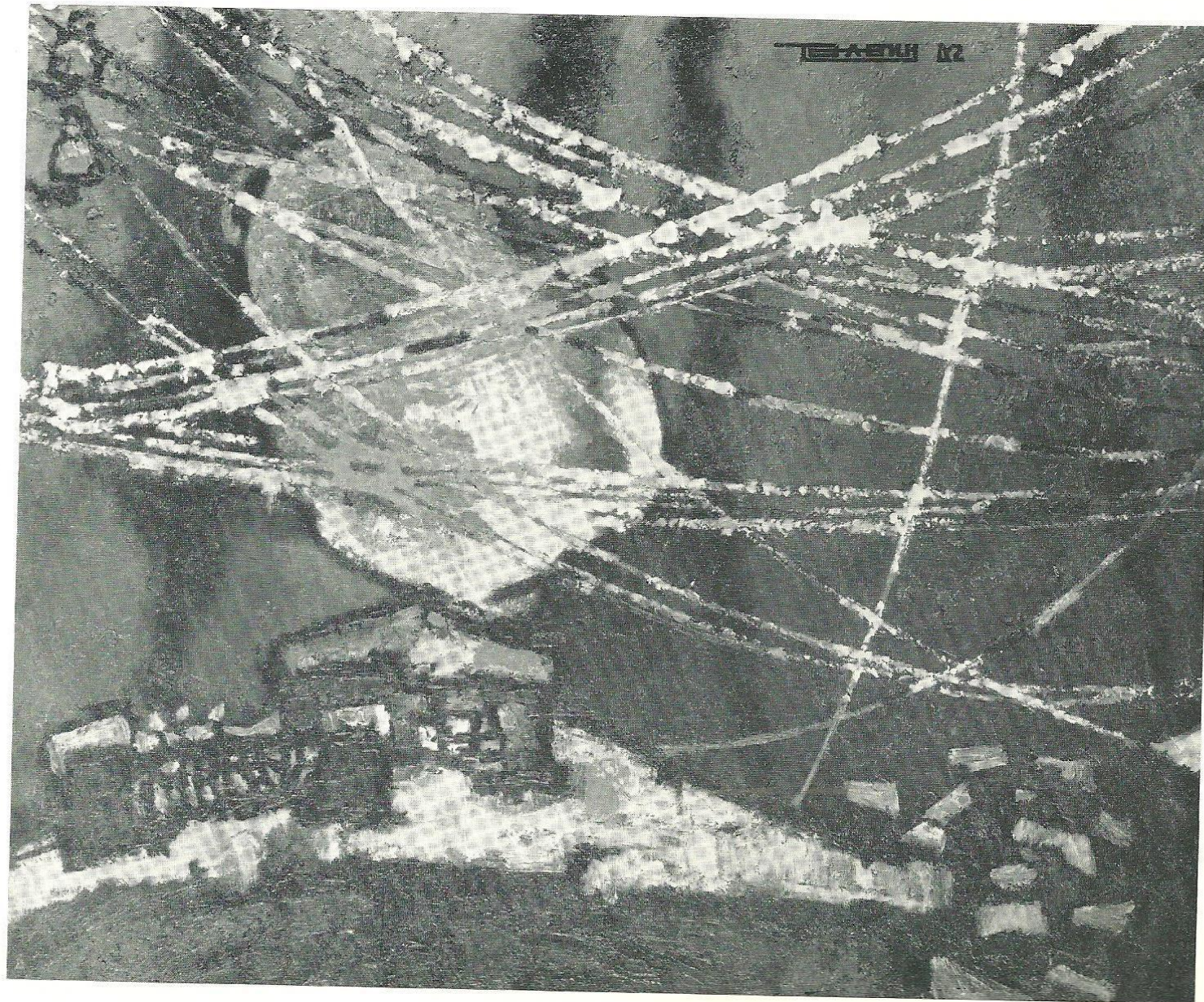
























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Chi Pai Chi	Magritte	
Goncharova	Miro	

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including

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Kaplan	Nikonov	Sarian
Neisvestny	Poliakov	Tiapushkin

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