

NOT TO BE MISSED THIS WEEK...

IN 1985 Raisa Gorbachev paid a visit to the mansion on Suvorovsky Bulvar in Moscow formerly occupied by Mikhail Lunin, one of the Decembrists who had plotted against the Tsar in 1825. The building had just been opened as the enlarged home of the Museum of the East, and by way of celebration it was holding an exhibition of the works of Rudolf Khachatryan.

The success of this Armenian artist – who was named as a "People's Artist of Armenia" by the Armenian government in 1984 and "Master of the Art of Drawing" by his fellow artists – has been remarkable. He has a string of prizes, exhibitions and sales under his belt; and three years after viewing the exhibition on Suvorovsky Bulvar Raisa Gorbachev herself sat for him.

Perhaps even more important, given the paper shortage in the Soviet Union, a monograph with over a hundred plates of his work was published in 1986, a rare honour for a living Soviet artist.

His career has not always run so smoothly. In 1969 Brezhnev's cultural watchdogs put pressure on the Artists' Union to throw him out as an "infectious formalist". But the Union stood by him. And so in 1970 his painting *From Urartu to the Present* – a tableau of Armenian history starting with the "Kingdom of Ararat" – was shown at the Louvre in Paris.

Now, after numerous shows in America, more of his work is being seen in Europe. An exhibition of his paintings and works on paper, along with work by ten other artists from Armenia, has just opened in London.

It showcases work by contemporary surrealists and abstractionists, alongside more traditional artists like Ruben Grigorian and Ashot Hovanessian.

The Soviet state no longer remains the sole provider of spacious studios and materials for Artists' Union members. A lot of money now comes from the West, in the shape of commissions and sales. Khachatryan's portraits, for example, have been bought by American multi-millionaires such as Alex Manukian and Dr R Belian, and his portraits command anything up to \$3,000.

The bloody events in Nagorno-Karabakh and the catastrophic earthquake of December 1988 created a lot of international sympathy for Armenia. Armenian artists have consequently received more funding to visit and exhibit in foreign countries.



Rudolf Khachatryan: 'A human being always carries his childhood within himself'

Armenian art comes west

JEANNE VRONSKAYA talks to the painter Rudolf Khachatryan

This southernmost and smallest of the three Caucasian republics of the Soviet Union has thus fathered a flourishing art scene, blending a centuries-old tradition of miniature painting with diverse modern trends. Under the influence of one of its best known colourists, Martiros Sarian (1880-1972), Armenia has produced a highly individual contemporary style.

Interestingly, the pressures, particularly under Stalin, to conform to the hated trend of social realism did not lead to the formation of an Armenian underground art. Armenian artists instead defied such pressures; they depicted

nationalistic themes and sacred symbols with a vivid palette. The elements of this defiant tradition continue to the present day.

Khachatryan comes from a working-class family. His education consisted of only four years at a local school in Erevan, where he was born, but his tutor was a leading Armenian artist, Yervant Kotchar, who emigrated to France in 1920 and returned to Armenia in 1936. On his return he was arrested, and he was not released until Khrushchev's time.

Chain-smoking and speaking in Russian with a thick Armenian accent, Khachatryan

now says: "The appearance of Lenin was the appearance of anti-Christ. The second anti-Christ was Stalin, his real successor. They hated spirit and beauty and my teacher Yervant Kotchar was their victim. But I carry on, and I will carry on."

Khachatryan became a member of the Soviet Artists' Union in 1960, aged only 23. He went on to collect numerous awards – a bronze medal from the Viennese Young Artists Competition, a gold medal at the Transcaucasian Biennale of Art in Tbilisi in Georgia, and a silver medal in a national competition for Armenian artists in 1965. In 1969 he received the first

prize for a portrait of the Armenian composer Komitas, commissioned by the Armenian Ministry of Culture to commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth.

Khachatryan's studio in Moscow is in the heart of the artistic quarter, in the Arbat on Krivokolenny Pereulok (literally "bended knee alley"). He has another studio in Erevan, which he acquired with a state donation of several hundred thousand roubles.

Throughout 1989 and 1990, when Armenians were attacked and thrown out of the neighbouring Muslim republic of Azerbaijan, his Moscow studio was turned into a "little Armenia", with fellow artists' families eating and sleeping in every room.

According to Russian art critics, Khachatryan has a unique place in contemporary art because he treats drawing very much as others do painting. He applies sepia to the surface of *leokas*, the priming board used in icon-painting, to create a highly textured finish. He first used the technique in the 1980s. Sepia interacts with the chalk, creating a variety of tones which ultimately have the richness and depth of painting. Far from a pale imitation of a painting, he has created a self-sufficient medium in its own right. But whatever the sophistication of his technique, his philosophy is decidedly naive, almost childlike.

"A human being always carries his childhood within himself and the more time goes by we the more we return to it," he says. "This is why great writers write memoirs about their childhoods."

"In my philosophy, when a human being is born he contains inside himself a full programme of his life," he says. "It's the same with our globe; everything is pre-planned; the end is pre-planned. To search for anything new in outer space is nonsense; one has to search for it here. The ancient races thought more wisely about space than we do; we have damaged the whole globe, poisoned its very atmosphere."

Khachatryan is married to Natasha Schneider, a costume designer for the Soviet cinema and theatre and an artist in her own right. It is the second marriage for both, and three of their four children are artists.

I recently visited Seva Khachatryan, the couple's 29-year-old son, at his Moscow studio. He graduated from the elite Nemirovich-Danchenko school studio in Moscow in 1984 as a stage director but like his parents turned to painting, and when I was in Moscow last November he held a one-man exhibition at an art gallery near Sokolniki Park. He looked very much like following in his father's footsteps.

Contemporary Art from Armenia until May 4 at the New Academy Gallery, 34 Windmill Street, London W1