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Russian and Rich: Art's New Tastemaker

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A light installation by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer in the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture in Moscow.

ONE day in December, Dasha Zhukova wandered into the Bakhmetevsky Bus Garage, a giant red-brick Constructivist-era landmark near the Olympic Stadium in Moscow. She was immediately entranced by the space, a vast parallelogram spanning nearly 92,000 square feet and an unusual array of vertical and circular windows. Designed in 1926 by Konstantin Melnikov, the garage is much loved by architects.

"I thought Moscow should have a space like this for contemporary art," Ms. Zhukova, 27, said in an interview, sipping a cappuccino in the top-floor cafe of the Tate Modern here. "There is a huge thirst for knowledge among the younger generation for contemporary art, but most of them learn about it by going on the Internet."

It was a serendipitous discovery for Ms. Zhukova. Thanks to her, the cavernous building will reopen next month as the Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, a nonprofit institution that brings art to Moscow and schools the public on what it's about. Its first show will be a retrospective of the artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov.

Overnight, Ms. Zhukova's new center and her connections, including a billionaire, art-collecting boyfriend, have made her an art-world It Girl. Her sudden fame attests to the seismic effect that Russian money — and in some cases Ukrainian or Georgian money — is having.

When Ms. Zhukova first saw the building, she wasn't searching for an art space or anything else in particular. The landmark structure, which is government-owned, had been leased to the Federation of Jewish Communities in Russia. Through perseverance she was able to take over the lease and then hire Jamie Fobert, a London architect, to transform it.

It was a powerful reflection of her deep pockets. Ms. Zhukova is the daughter of an oligarch, Aleksandr Zhukov, a deputy prime minister who lives in Moscow and made his fortune in oil. And there is help at the ready from her companion, the 41-year-old financier Roman Abramovich, who has riveted the art world recently by paying top dollar for Francis Bacon, Giacometti and others. (Forbes this year estimated his net worth at \$23.5 billion.)

Little wonder, then, that in late spring, when word got out that Ms. Zhukova had decided to throw a June 12 dinner party in the bowels of the former bus garage, dealers and collectors around the globe began maneuvering desperately for invitations.

Leaving the space bare except for a giant chandelier-style light installation by the artist **Rafael Lozano-Hemmer**, she invited some 300 people to what she called a “soft opening.” A caterer was flown in from London, and Amy Winehouse was hired to sing. Among those milling about were young European aristocrats like Charlotte Casiraghi, daughter of Princess Caroline of Monaco; New York collectors including the cosmetics heir Ronald S. Lauder and the hedge-fund manager Steven A. Cohen; powerful New York dealers like Larry Gagosian; and artists like Jeff Koons.

“It took chutzpah for Dasha to put on an event and attract so many people,” said Oliver Barker, head of contemporary art at Sotheby’s in London. “It shows how seriously they’re taking her.”

Mollie Dent-Brocklehurst, a former director of the Gagosian Gallery in London, who has been hired to help plan the Garage Center, said that she and Ms. Zhukova sought out artists as guests so they could “listen to their response.”

“Ultimately we want this to be a place where artists will want to show their work,” she said.

Ms. Zhukova herself is not yet a collector, but her newfound love of art has influenced Mr. Abramovich’s collecting. There are long precedents for Russians collecting Western art. Peter the Great frequented the salesrooms of Amsterdam, scooping up 17th-century Dutch and Flemish paintings; Catherine the Great’s tastes were voracious and included Titian, Poussin and French silver. Around the turn of the 20th century, Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov collected some of the greatest Impressionist paintings directly from the artists’ studios and, later, assembled troves of Matisses and Picassos.

“It’s history repeating itself,” Mr. Barker said.

A few weeks before her visit to the Tate, Ms. Zhukova spent a few days in Switzerland at Art Basel, the annual contemporary art fair, with Mr. Abramovich. Their arrival caused an even bigger stir than appearances by Brad Pitt or Sofia Coppola.

While there is a tabloid quality to the public’s interest — Mr. Abramovich divorced his wife, Irina, after forging his relationship with Ms. Zhukova — there is also considerable fascination with his penchant for paying record prices for whatever strikes his fancy. In recent auctions in London and New York, for example, he is said to have bought a Degas pastel for \$26.5 million, a 1976 triptych by Francis Bacon for \$86.3 million and a painting by Lucian Freud for \$33.6 million.

However discreetly, he and other rich Russians who made their fortunes when Soviet industries like oil, steel and gas were privatized are now living large, with private planes, yachts and multiple houses. And like many of these newly rich, Mr. Abramovich and Ms. Zhukova now make their homes here in London.

The advantages here for wealthy Russians are considerable. It is close enough to Moscow (a three-hour trip by private plane), it has excellent schools, and it allows them to live fairly anonymously in grand houses. There are tax advantages, too: people who live and work in Britain but are foreign-born typically pay no taxes on income generated outside the country.

Fiercely private for the most part, these Russians generally do not support British cultural institutions and seldom attend gallery openings or auction house parties.

Ms. Zhukova is different. She has agreed to co-host the Serpentine Gallery's big fund-raiser next month, and she is keenly interested in meeting artists. Last month she visited Damien Hirst's studios in Gloucestershire, where he gave her a preview of the work he will be selling at Sotheby's in London in September. "There were definitely pieces I liked," she said cautiously. "But not everything."



The Garage Center

The Russian embrace of Western contemporary art has long been coming. With the birth of private Russian fortunes some 20 years ago, "Russians started buying Russian art in their own country, even though non-Russians still remained the biggest consumer of Russian art," said Joachim Pissarro, a great-grandson of Camille Pissarro and an adjunct curator at the Museum of Modern Art. (He was among those who flocked to the dinner at the Garage, which he called "amazing.")

And until recently, market experts say, they were primarily interested in the decorative arts. In 2004, for instance, the Russian billionaire Victor Vekselberg spent about \$100 million for the entire Forbes family Fabergé collection, a purchase that included 9 imperial Easter eggs and some 180 other pieces. Then about five years ago, some of those Russian collectors widened their sights to mostly Russian-born artists, like Chagall. "They skipped over everything else," Mr. Pissarro said.

Since then, he said, the tide has turned. They "started to collect Impressionist, Modern and contemporary art at a speed that is absolutely astonishing," he said. "Now they're going outside of Russia, buying artists like Jeff Koons. The pendulum has swung 180 degrees, with Russians becoming one of the most powerful forces in the market."

The tastes of rich collectors from the former Soviet republics tend to be unpredictable. The goal seems to be to snap up whatever is perceived at the moment to be the best, from a much-admired Picasso painting to a work by the hot Scottish-born artist Peter Doig.

"The whim factory is something quite amazing," Mr. Pissarro said. "They can change directions at the speed of lightning."

Two years ago the art world was gripped by the drama surrounding Picasso's "Dora Maar With Cat," a 1941 portrait that sold at Sotheby's in New York for a staggering \$95.2 million. The man seemed inexperienced and sat in the rear of the salesroom, unusual for a well-connected bidder.

When the hammer went down, he ducked out of the room, but not before news photographers captured his face. Within minutes that image was ricocheting through cyberspace as dealers and collectors tried to identify him. It finally emerged that he was bidding for a Georgian oligarch, not a Russian one: Boris Ivanishvili, a mining magnate.

In the same New York auction season, rubles appeared for the first time on the currency boards at Sotheby's and Christie's. A year later Sotheby's opened its first office in Moscow; Christie's is about to do the same as a way of catering to big collectors and cultivating new ones.

Ms. Zhukova herself acknowledges being a relative art neophyte. "I didn't study art history and don't remember names of artists," she said, her perfect English tinged faintly by a Russian accent. "But if I like an image, I remember it."

Petite and striking, with long brown hair and big eyes, she cultivates a purposely understated appearance; blue jeans, T-shirts and ballet slippers are her uniform. Yet she is poised and self-assured as she describes trying to navigate the often treacherous waters of the art world.

Born in Moscow in 1981, Ms. Zhukova is an only child. Her parents divorced when she was young, and when her mother, a molecular biologist, took a job at the University of California, Los Angeles, in the early 1990s, they moved there. Ms. Zhukova spoke not a word of English.

But she quickly adjusted, she said, attending schools in Los Angeles and then the University of California, Santa Barbara, where she took premed courses and studied homeopathic medicine.

A year ago few people in the art world had heard of her. She has a bit of recognition in fashion circles because she and a friend, Christina Tang, introduced a clothing line last year called Kova & T, simple basics like blue jeans, leggings and T-shirts that are now sold at stores including Saks, Intermix and Fred Segal.

Today, she shuttles from Moscow to London to Los Angeles and points beyond, and she appears to shun publicity and purposely remains low key.

On that summer afternoon at the Tate, Ms. Zhukova had just returned from New York, where she made a pilgrimage to Dia:Beacon on the Hudson, a museum known for devoting rooms to artists like Andy Warhol and Robert Ryman.

"I loved the spirit and the philosophy there," she said. "I'm trying to see as much as I can."

In Basel she similarly made a point of visiting the bucolic Beyeler Foundation building, designed by Renzo Piano. While she found both institutions interesting, she said, she isn't modeling the Garage after any specific museum. "I'm taking different aspects of different institutions that are inspiring influences," she said.

In addition to galleries, the Garage Center will have educational spaces, a theater, a bookstore and a cafe. Ms. Zhukova declined to estimate how much it would cost to renovate and operate the art center, saying it was too early to say. Besides aid from Mr. Abramovich, financing is also coming from other private sources and corporate sponsorship. "We've also been approached by some luxury brands," she said.

Admission will be free, which Ms. Zhukova said is important. Eventually, she said, she plans to hire a director, probably a Russian who will be in touch with the interests of local visitors.

After the Kabakov exhibition that opens next month, the Garage Center plans to exhibit works from the collection of Christie's owner, the luxury goods magnate François Pinault, whose foundation is based in the Palazzo Grassi in Venice. And Ms. Dent-Brocklehurst said she was considering commissioning artists to create site-specific works for the space, analogous to installations in the vast Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern.

Asked if the Garage would have its own collection, Ms. Zhukova said that would be many years down the road, if ever.

"For now I'm trying to learn as much as I can to make up for my lack of art history," she said. "The more I read, the more I realize what I don't know."