

Gazprombank was founded in 1990. The Bank is currently active in 64 regions of the Russian Federation – from Kaliningrad, the country's westernmost city located on the Baltic Sea, to Yuzhno-Sakhalinsk on the North Pacific island of Sakhalin just north of Japan. The Bank also operates numerous subsidiaries, representative offices and affiliated banks in Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, China, Mongolia, Hong Kong, India, South Africa, Switzerland and Luxembourg.

The Gazprombank Art Collection was started in 2012. It now boasts over 850 artworks by approximately 76 Russian artists – some of them are already famous, some are just emerging on the art scene. It is the only corporate collection in Russia and worldwide focusing exclusively on contemporary Russian art from the 1990s to the present. Correlation with the global context is a key factor in the selection of artworks for the collection. The other important factor is continuity between the young artists and their practices and their counterparts of the older generations.

Gazprombank is the only member of the IACCCA (International Association of Corporate Collections of Contemporary Art) from Russia or Eastern Europe.

### **Interview with Marina Sitnina, the Gazprombank Collection Corporate Director**

#### **1) Initially, what was the reason for starting the Collection? What spurred it on?**

The Bank traditionally plays an important role in supporting culture. We have always seen our mission in producing additional value - not only in the economic sense, but also a spiritual one by engaging in cultural projects and giving support to museums and different cultural institutions. The corporate Collection is viewed as our share of contribution to the development of the contemporary culture, to the cultural legacy of tomorrow.

As for expert knowledge, we acquired it while rendering financial services in the field of alternative investments, in the art market namely – with the help of many professionals from the art sphere. And we are still learning in the process.

#### **2) As all the corporate art collectors in Russia are banks, do you think banks have a special duty towards patronage or philanthropy including cultural?**

It seems that banks are no closer to art than other companies. On the other hand, it is Banca Monte Dei Paschi that can be named the founder of corporate collecting back in the XVth Century. It was the first institution that is known to produce an artwork for itself, commissioning Benvenuto di Giovanni to make the fresco Madonna della Misericordia. One can think of the Medicis and their activity as well. It is interesting - why banks, but this is how it was historically.

### 3) Where is the Collection located currently? Are you going to open up the Collection for visitors?

The Collection is partly in the offices. We are happy to provide the employees interested in conceptual art and the Collection with the artworks for temporary exhibit in the workplace. Most of the Collection is deposited in the storage that was specially built to meet the highest standards of art storage. Unfortunately, we are unable to give access to the Collection to a wider audience, primarily because there is simply no appropriate space for the permanent exposition, because the Collection today needs at least one thousand square meters to exhibit all the works. And it is still being actively enhanced and supplemented. Of course, probably like any collection, we aspire to found our own corporate museum sometime in the future. In the meantime, we loan a lot of works to public exhibitions in museums, galleries, art forums etc., do our own temporary shows from the Collection engaging young curators etc.



Nikita Alexeev 'Impressions of Places and Events' 2009. Ivan Chuikov 'Window LLX' 2005. Yuri Albert 'Self-Portrait with Closed Eyes' 1995. Exhibition 'Dreaming Russia' Albertina Museum, Vienna 2013. Photo: Alexander Murashkin

**4) Are there any limitations in acquiring artworks? For example, ideological financial or other?**

Surely, corporate collecting has its specifics. Private collectors can buy and hang on their walls any artwork they like, it is just their taste that matters. As for us, we have to keep in mind that works are supposed to be exhibited in the office – space where people work. Therefore, naturally, we tend to avoid acquiring pieces with blatant scenes of violence, sex etc.

**5) Are there any regulations forbidding to sell the artworks from the Collection?**

No, none at all. Selling the works is not forbidden. We have not done it yet, but I suppose we may sell some works one day to acquire new ones. Some pieces duplicate others, and for that reason we might think of selling them for the sake of buying something else.

**6) What are the most rewarding elements of art collecting?**

Any company has its own corporate culture. It is not limited to business issues exclusively but must be considered in a wider context. It can help an employee to get the feeling of working in a stable reliable company that can afford to invest in the future and to commit time and effort to the socially important problems, beyond economical. One gets the feeling of belonging to culture in a wider context. Our contemporary art collection plays an important role in forming the corporate environment of Gazprombank. We invest expertise, time and resources into forming the Collection, we follow a certain promotion strategy, and as a result the Collection increases in value. There is a certain maxim: not every investor in art makes a collector, but any dedicated collector turns out to be a good investor. One may perceive the Collection as an asset. However, for the Bank, taking the scope of its other assets, it is not a fundamental financial investment in a material asset, it is rather an investment in culture and spiritual environment.

**7) Could you talk more about your partnerships with institutions?**

It is wide and varied: we collaborate with state and private museums in Russia and abroad, with galleries and cultural institutions in the Russian regions, with art fairs and biennials, including international ones, by loaning works and realising our own exhibition projects.

Lately, we have engaged in a mutual project with the Museo d'Arte Moderna di Bologna (MAMbo). This union comprises 14 museums of Bologna. One of them hosted the exhibition of Russian avant-garde from the State Russian Museum,

dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the October Revolution. Artistic Director of the modern art museum in Bologna approached us with the idea of showing contemporary Russian art in dialogue with the historic Russian avant-garde. International curators chose around 300 artworks from our collection for the show which was accompanied by a catalogue. Interestingly, the artists spoke for themselves on its pages, answering the curators' questions about who they are, what they have to say, their outlook and their interrelations with their predecessors. Thus, instead of an academic catalogue with traditional descriptions and classifications, there appeared a very unusual one - in an interactive form.



Anatoly Osmolovsky from the series 'Hardware' 2016. Arseny Zhilyaev 'Tsiolkovsky. Second Advent' 2016. Exhibition 'It's OK to change your mind!' 2018. Courtesy Istituzione Bologna Musei. Photo: Matteo Monti

### **8) What are the future plans for the Collection?**

To continue all our activities - promotion of artists by participating in exhibitions in Russia and abroad, in museums, fairs and biennials, arranging our own shows in both Russian cultural capitals, provinces and regional centres, taking part in various publishing projects. Lately, we launched a website of the Collection in both Russian and English to get to the wider international audience.

Producing artwork is an important aspect of our activity. Due to the variety of techniques and materials, contemporary art tends to have higher production costs than traditional art, so the artist might not be able to create an art piece simply due to the lack of financial means. We help artists realise their ideas. For example, we helped a well-known video-artist Taus Makhacheva to create works for the Venice and Liverpool biennials by pre-financing their production and bought them for our Collection. We try to give opportunities to the artists to show their art, especially worldwide, in international exhibition projects. Also, we endeavour to acquire the composite projects as a whole rather than buying individual pieces with the purpose of preserving original ideas and the conceptual integrity of the artists' works.

**9) Why is art important? Why should corporations, foundations, universities and museums invest in art?**

I think all that distinguishes us from animals, all that makes us human, is in the spiritual sphere, where art and literature play a key role. One can talk of how art transforms the world or how it is supposed to reflect it, or of its other functions and implications, but I think that what is paramount with art is its role in creating spirituality. Morals and ethics are undeniably derivatives of spirituality as such – and without morals and ethics neither a human being, nor a corporation can be a full member of society in the contemporary world.

**10) Why do you think there are so few corporate art collections in Russia? After all, art (and thus art collecting) is a mega trend around the world.**

To me, it is because of the young age of business in Russia, which is not older than 30 years. Therefore, it is inappropriate to compare the number of corporate collections in Russia with the Western world. In the Soviet Union there existed certain prototypes of corporate collections, however, mostly in the form of memorabilia. So, the collections were not dedicated to art, rather to the history of the product or the company's activity.

In the 1990s in Russia, with the appearance of market economy the first wave of collecting emerged but like in the rest of the world it ended with the economic crisis. Due to the crisis the first banks to collect art, like Inkombank and Stolychny, had to end their activities. Besides, there are some issues related to the Russian legislation: the collectors do not have any tax exemptions. Nevertheless, I believe that corporate collecting in Russia is an evolving process.



Sergey Bugaev from the series 'Anti – Lissitzky' 1991. Svetlana Shuvaeva from the series 'It's OK to change your mind!' 2016. Exhibition 'It's OK to change your mind!' 2018. Courtesy Istituzione Bologna Musei. Photo: Matteo Monti

**11) What advice would you give to corporations who are considering starting an art collection?**

To learn from the world experience, to study theory and practice of corporate collecting. There are lots of serious issues connected with cataloguing, storage, restoration and conservation that require a professional approach, not to mention a variety of legal issues associated with the acquisition of art, copyright, droit de suite etc.

**12) What kind of impact will the prospective Museum Mile have on Moscow and Russia? Could it spur on more corporate art collections?**

This cultural space will definitely be highly sought after. I am sure that when this magnificent museum and educational complex of contemporary art will be opened by the V-A-C Foundation, more possibilities to make exhibition projects and to show corporate collections in particular will pop up. I believe that the Museum Mile project will keep on nurturing interest in art and culture, that in turn will be embodied in the development of corporate collecting in Russia.

From the Corporate Art Collecting Series

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