

The AO UniCredit Bank's Art Collection is a one of a kind corporate collection including painting, sculpture and graphic art by Russian artists from the 1920s-1930s, which started in 1993. The specific distinction of the post-avant-garde art or the art of the 1920s–1930s is that it cannot, even for a short time, allow one artistic language to claim the dominant position in the new system of art projects. The post-avant-garde is the space where languages and concepts of the development of art compete fiercely. The works of art comprising the Collection of the UniCredit Bank reflect that behind the official version of cultural history, one can see an alternative one — the history of a human, of a person, worthy of attention and undoubtedly deserving respect; behind the values of success and expediency, the meanings of freedom, independence and a man's responsibility for the future are revealed. Most of the paintings in the Collection both serve to decorate the head office and are exhibited regularly in shows organised by the Bank or loaned to exhibitions.

## **Interview with Alexandre Balashov, Art Critic and Curator of the AO UniCredit Bank Collection**

### **1) Why is art important? Why should corporations, foundations, universities and museums for instance collect?**

To me, art is a certain language, the main tool of man that provides understanding of human limits. Art is like sonar, it gives signals that hit up against one's boundaries, the view of one's history, one's freedom, one's essence, one's language, one's capabilities, one's past, one's future, one's life, of what you basically are. It hits these profound issues. The signals then come back, as if ricocheting from one's limits, they are altered, however, a little and thus alter one's limits. Art is a tool of a man who it derives from. Noam Chomsky used to say that the competence of a language consists not of allowing, but rather of forcing us to speak. So, art not only allows us to be humans, but also forces us to be. This is a condition of our humanity. Just like the fact that at a certain moment of history man had evolved to thinking about god, speaks volumes, similarly, does the fact that man created paintings for grasping something important in oneself. A man painted women, smiling with their strange smiles, or depicted black monsters, gathering at the fire. What is it that one learned about oneself then? Time and again the whole of humanity changed on the coattails of an artist.

Corporations, foundations, universities, museums etc. have an opportunity to foster sustainable social development by investing in art and supporting talent, arts and culture in their respective communities. UniCredit, for example, believes that through art you can have a positive impact on the community because art and culture have the power to foster social cohesiveness and wellbeing. Art allows for positive shared experiences that add value and create a feeling of unity and belonging.

### **2) 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.**

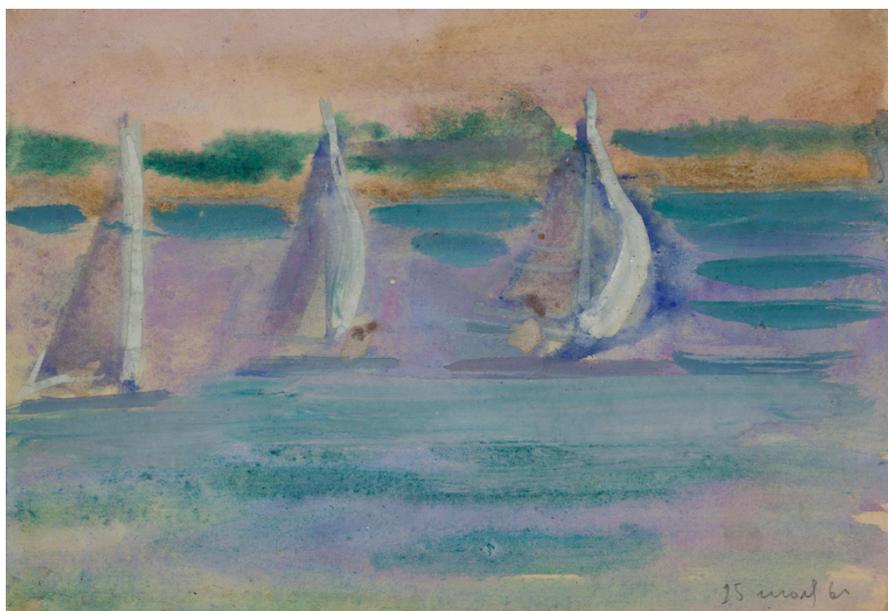
I think, the problem is not in the companies, nor is it in the business community. The problem is in the art world itself. As for Russia nowadays, the biggest difficulty is that the artworld atmosphere is scarcely transparent, events and activities in this area are highlighted lopsidedly. Mass media presents art as if it were an entertainment industry phenomenon, whereas the voices of professionals and expert voices can hardly be heard and only in the professional community.

The world of art must attain more space in the contemporary human's life, it cannot be limited to the entertainment field. Art must become a lifestyle, for the need in corporate collections to emerge in Russia.

**3) From experience, what kind of difficulties do Russian companies meet while starting and managing a corporate art collection?**

The main problem I see in corporate collecting among companies worldwide is that mutual understanding between the world of art and business cannot be easily attained. It is connected to the fact that when many companies come up with an idea to build a collection, keep on acting in the economic field, they keep on doing economic work, however, working in the art field is something completely different. They treat the collection as if it were a business project. In this case, art and contemporary art especially, become entertainment, luxury items, instruments for a man to reveal himself in a society, or for a group of people, or for a company. Art becomes pragmatic, instrumental for achieving certain goals.

It is much easier to present art as entertainment today than to try to appeal to the person's experience, to speak of humanistic values, by which an artist is driven, and to speak of the ultimate crucial issues of a human. Treating art as entertainment industry leads to decay of human activity; it turns nutrition into fast food. The central difficulty, for me, is to pursue the aims of a company and at the same time to treat collecting with the highest responsibility.



Boris Chernyshev's 'Chiviryovo Yachts (No. 893)'

**4) Why did you decide to collect Russian art and why the art of the 1920s-30 specifically?**

The Collection of UniCredit Bank was perceived as a reflection of the search for the answer to one of the main questions of Russian culture. The question was particularly resonant in the years when the Collection started: what is our past? The appearance of new international financial institutes was regarded as an element of the new modern economic and sociocultural environment and was linked to the necessity of the translation of cultural codes that created the foundation of the system of values for a democratic society.

From its very beginning in 1993 the UniCredit Bank Collection (before 2007 – the Collection of the International Moscow Bank) was regarded as a social project: we understood it as a dialogue about Russian culture, art and history. It reflected our interest in the increased significance of the matters of cultural history for society that was going through a complex process of reconsidering itself and its values; we understood the importance of this process and believed that the openness of the modern world to history was of the utmost importance.

The works of art comprising the Collection of UniCredit Bank say that behind the official version of cultural history, we can see another one – human, personal, worthy of attention and, undoubtedly deserving of respect; behind the meanings of success and expediency, the meanings of freedom, the independence and a man’s responsibility for the future are revealed.

The UniCredit Bank Collection contains works by artists whose names became the symbols of the Russian art of the 1920s-1930s; Alexander Drevin, Nadezhda Udaltsova, Mikhail Sokolov, Antonina Sofronova, Leonid Chupyatov, Alexander Labas, Leonid Zusman, Rostislav Barto etc.



Alexander Drevin’s ‘In the Mountains of Armenia’

##### **5) How does the Collection express the unique identity of the Bank?**

Some art speaks of wealth and status, some speaks of sophistication, knowledge, intellect, refinement, and one can choose one’s way. One can tell a lot about you, looking at a picture on your wall. I am totally for W. Kandinsky, K. Malevich, A. Warhol, J-M. Basquiat, however, when I see works of Antonina Sofronova, Mikhail Sokolov, Tatyana Mavrina in someone’s office, I get really interested in such a person. I understand that they decide personally which work to get, they do not hide behind the art, their interest, their soul can be felt. I think our Collection helps us to stay alive, our Collection lacks snobbism – this is what I cannot tolerate in the approach to some art.

Besides, our corporate Collection expresses the unique historical and cultural experience of Russia, the individuality of each artist who contributed to Russian art of the 20th Century. It is not state art, not ostentatious art, not museum art, not exhibition art, not façade art, not art that adapts for various ideologemes coming from the outside, rather it is art that speaks of a real historic man, of the man who is a real 20th-Century-art-culture bearer. We speak of a man. History and culture come later. We speak of a man: what can be more important? The uniqueness of every man is an undeniable value for us.

**6) Do you feel that the Collection has been an important contact point between existing and future clients of the Bank?**

Being the Curator of the Collection, I am more involved in forming it and I rarely contact the Bank's clients. But they have turned to me expressing interest in the Collection. Moreover, I recall several private banking clients of the Bank who started their own collections after they got acquainted with ours.

Art can certainly offer an important point of contact between the Bank and the wider community. Being an active supporter of art and culture, UniCredit shows its belief in the importance of art and its potential in benefiting and adding value to the communities in which the Bank operates.

**7) What kind of specific art related benefits do you offer your staff?**

We run meetings regularly. We call them conversations or lectures, where I am speaking about artists. We communicate with colleagues, friendly, straightforwardly and openly. Often, they suggest subjects for discussion, we touch upon wider and wider cultural issues. Our community consists of more than 50 people who are fond of our art. We hold meetings in the Bank's premises or located somewhere else. This is not an educational programme anymore, this is becoming a lifestyle.

**8) Can you share an interesting story or situation connected with the Collection?**

There is one story worth mentioning. After the Bank used the work of Konstantin Chebotaryov 'Tzar's Courtiers' on the private banking limited edition card, front desk started receiving calls from a collector who was genuinely interested in acquiring it. He kept calling for quite a while with several bids, each time increasing the amount: some 250, 300, 350 thousand euros, etc etc. So in the end, we were forced to stop him from bargaining. Frankly, we felt a certain pleasure that our works can induce such a craving. But still, the idea to sell the Collection simply does not exist.



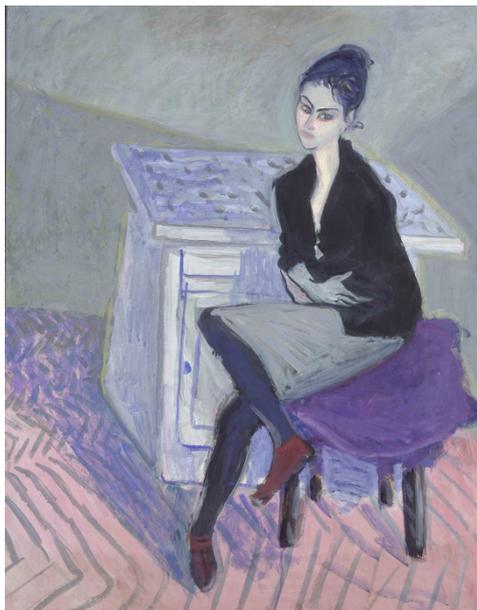
Konstantin Chebotaryov's 'Tzar's Courtiers'

**9) Do you collaborate with foreign cultural institutions, so as to popularise Russian art of the 1920s-1930s abroad?**

We have been running little international work with the Collection. However, the Europeans are quite interested in it. At least our German, French and Italian colleagues who come across Russian post-avant-garde, who come to know it deeper, express genuine interest.

**10) What are some of the future plans of the Collection?**

The main priority so far was supplementing the Collection. Some time ago, we included the works of the artists of the 1920s-1930s that were made in the 1950s-60s. The decision to widen the range of works being acquired stems from two crucial issues. Firstly, some outstanding artists, Vladimir Favorsky, for instance, destroyed their early works, there are none left from the 1920s-30s. Secondly, many artists evolved greatly after the Great Patriotic War, like Vasily Koroteyev and Leonid Zusman. When one compares the early expressive, expressionist and powerful works of the 1920s by Leonid Zusman with his moderate, lyrical, subtle works of the 1960s, full of attention, depth and individuality, one can see not only a historical moment, but also a personality standing behind it. By exploring his art, one can see that the man does not end with the epoch, which is especially precious. I keep recalling the words of Vladimir Favorsky, who once said: 'In Russia, there are many artists under 40 years, there are few over 40'.



Leonid Zusman's 'Portrait of a Ballerina'

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