

Conference Paper

The Artworks of Boris Grigoriev (1886–1939) at Sotheby's and Christie's Auctions in the 1980s–2010s

Tamara Galeeva¹ and Larissa Yakimova²¹Professor of Art History, Chair of Art History and Museology, Ural Federal University²Senior Lecturer of Art History, Chair of Art History and Museology, Ural Federal University

Abstract

This article discusses the introduction of artworks by a Russian émigré artist, Boris Grigoriev, to the Western art market during the 1980s–2010s, using the examples of Russian art sales at Sotheby's and Christie's auction houses. The history of Grigoriev's artwork sales at the major auctions, peaks and slumps of interest in them, together with the stylistic preferences of buyers and other factors, are addressed less as market phenomena and more as a result of art historical research, expert appraisal of the artist's practice, and, at the same time, as a basis for further investigations contributing not only to economic value, but also to a symbolic component.

Keywords: Boris Grigoriev, Russian art, art market, expert appraisal, auction sales, original painting, forged artworks

Corresponding Author:

Tamara Galeeva
Tamara.Galeeva@urfu.ru

Published: 25 August 2020

Publishing services provided by
Knowledge E

© Tamara Galeeva and Larissa Yakimova. This article is distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License](#), which permits unrestricted use and redistribution provided that the original author and source are credited.

Selection and Peer-review under the responsibility of the Questions of Expertise in Culture, Arts and Design Conference Committee.

1. Introduction

Over the course of more than forty years, artworks by the Russian émigré artist Boris Dmitrievich Grigoriev (1886–1939) circulate around the global antique art market. During this time, their status at Sotheby's and Christie's auctions has significantly strengthened, and their prices rose from the starting prices of \$1000–1500 in the 1970s to millions of dollars in 2000s–2010s. Private Russian collectors actively acquire the artist's paintings and drawings, bringing them back after their long stay abroad. Of course, all these years, Grigoriev's works have been sold at other major and smaller auctions in different cities throughout Europe and the USA, but the activities of Sotheby's and Christie's are a kind of reference that affects the emergence of certain trends and collecting preferences more than others [1–3]. Besides, they carry out their pre-sale expert appraisal of artworks much more thoroughly than small European auctions. Activity of a young auction house MacDougall's (London) deserves a separate discussion; in a short period of its existence (since 2005) it managed to achieve high economic results, and B. Grigoriev's works are regularly sold there.

 OPEN ACCESS

Recurring commercial success of Grigoriev's artworks at world auctions in recent decades demonstrates not only their economic liquidity, but also a whole range of interrelated factors that include the general state of research of the master's work, the return to the public sphere of those artworks that were deemed lost or were out of sight of specialists and collectors, and the need for new attributions.

2. Background

Boris Grigoriev's artworks were well known at the Western art market as early as in 1920s–1930s, especially in New York, where Russian artistic emigration merged with pre-WWII American avant-garde resulting in a kind of Russophile subculture. The main proselytizer of Russian art there was a well-known American art critic, collector and organizer of major exhibitions Christian Brinton (1870–1944), who actively contributed to the inclusion of Russian art in private and museum collections. It is largely thanks to him that works of Grigoriev — along with other Russian Modernists — gained not only symbolic but also economic value at the American pre-WWII market.

In the post-WWII period, Boris Grigoriev's art became subject of interest of the major auction houses Sotheby's and Christie's. Since the early 1970s, his single works appeared as part of mixed sales of the nineteenth–twentieth-centuries Western Modernist art (*Miracle of the Soup*, 1925, Impressionist and Modern Painting, Drawings and Sculpture, Christie's London, June 30, 1970), as well as at specialized auctions of Russian art, which since the 1970s were held regularly at London's Sotheby's (1970, 1972, 1974 — Twentieth Century Russian Paintings, Drawings and Watercolors 1900–1925). During these years, most of his works came from well known established collections (for example, *Girl on the Grass* from the *Intimit* series from Feodor Chaliapin's estate, Sotheby's, 1970), or from upmarket galleries that already demonstrated them at landmark exhibitions (*Aspects of Russian Experimental Art. 1900–1925*. Grosvenor Gallery, October 24 – November 18, 1967).

Since mid-1980s, amidst the Perestroika wave of Western interest in Russian art, B. Grigoriev's works were regularly sold at Christie's specialized auctions, whose staff always carefully selects artworks. For example, in October 1988 the Imperial and Post Revolutionary Russian Art auction in London at once featured several important works by the artist with an excellent provenance and a representative exhibition history: *Four Peasants In Front of a Cottage* (1923, from D. Burluik's collection), *Pont-Aven. Noon* (1924, from S. Schreiber's collection), *Motherhood. Portrait of Nadezhda Peshkova*

with Daughter (1926). All of them were purchased at prices significantly exceeding the estimate.

In auction practice, one and the same work by an artist often roams around, at times appearing at Sotheby's, then at Christie's, until it finds a permanent haven, sometimes even in a museum. This happened to a portrait of a Russian businessman of Greek origin Solomon Mollo (*Portrait of a Man Reading*, 1917), first presented at Grosvenor Gallery in London and then sold sequentially at Sotheby's in 1974 (Twentieth Century Russian and East European Paintings and Sculpture. 1900–1930), at Christie's in 1983 and 1985, again at Sotheby's in 1987, until it was assigned a final attribution and was acquired by the State Russian Museum via the ABA Gallery, New York. Admittedly, this has been happening to many other Grigoriev's works, changing their owners and value, especially in the cases of a purely investment nature of their acquisitions.

In the 1990s, a raise in price of Grigoriev's works on the global auction market reflected both a general trend in the Russian art sector, and a general process of including his work in the context of Russian art history. Forbidden in the USSR as an artist who 'distorted the faces of Russian peasantry' and gravitated to excessively erotic images (official description of Grigoriev in the Great Soviet Encyclopedia 1937) [4], he turned into a legitimate and important figure of pre-revolutionary era. Monographic publications and articles about the artist published in post-perestroika Russia, and his first memorial exhibition at the Pskov History and Art Museum (1989) contributed to a more active circulation of Grigoriev's artworks not only in the emerging Russian market, but also in the global action market [5–7].

A sharp decline in the Russian market that happened due to the 1992 currency crisis did not have a great effect on the market condition of Grigoriev's artworks: Russian sectors at Sotheby's and Christie's continued their annual sales. During this decade, a new strata of Russian buyers has emerged: the committed collectors carefully guided by expert consultants. According to Sotheby's experts, they have been acquiring up to 30% of lots at the auctions of Russian art. And although the limit of their acquisitions was confined to no more than \$100,000, they purchased up to 50% of artworks worth \$10,000–\$40,000 [8]. The prices of most of Grigoriev's artworks sold in the 1990s also fit these limits. One of the most expensive acquisitions of this decade is *Motherhood. Portrait of Nadezhda Peshkova with Daughter* (1926), which was sold in July 1997 for £40,000 (Christie's London).

In the 1990s, auction sales sometimes feature artworks from the collection of the artist's son Kirill Borisovich (1915–2001), who still lived at Cote d'Azur, in the small resort town of Cagnes-sur-Mer in Borisella villa, once fit up by his father. It was during these

years that the last significant works by Grigoriev, which the artist greatly valued and kept till the end of his life, left the family collection. The major painting-screen *Faces of Russia* (1921–1922) from the famous *Visages de Russie* series was sold at Sotheby's (Icons, Russian Pictures and Works of Art. London, November 24, 1992) and fortunately ended up in the collection of G. Vishnevskaya and M. Rostropovich, followed by the *Portrait of Peter Baksheev as Vaska Ash* (*Visages de Russie* series, 1922) in 1995 (Imperial and Post Revolutionary Russian Art, Christie's London, December 13, 1995). Alisher Usmanov bought these landmarks, as well as other Grigoriev's works from the famous collection, before the Sotheby's auction start in 2007, and today they are housed at the Congress Palace State Complex (Saint Petersburg). As a matter of fact, in the catalogue of the failed auction *Faces of Russia* were estimated at \$4,000,000 and *Vaska Ash* — at \$1,500,000.

In the 2000s, Russian department of Christie's and Sotheby's have been developing a qualitative strategy in the expert examination of the artworks they deal. External experts specializing in Russian painting provide lengthy catalogue entries to some of the most important works, which not only serve to attract potential buyers with impeccable provenance and exceptional quality of the 'shock' lots, but also are in fact small investigations embellished with interesting details. In the case of Grigoriev's works, this process was aided by the fundamental research publications about the artist's work that appeared in these years, his major solo exhibitions in the State Russian Museum (2009) and the State Tretyakov Gallery (2009), which reinforced interest in his works and contributed to their record prices in this period [9].

The first sale of Grigoriev's work for more than a million dollars happened in 2005 at Sotheby's (The Russian Sale, Sotheby's, London, April 21, 2005), when the price of a relatively small painting *Sailors in a Café* (1922, oil on canvas, 65.4 x 80.7cm) soared eight times the estimate and amounted to \$1,584,000. It was followed in 2006 by the success of a double children's portrait (*Children from a Public School*, 1922) at Christie's (Important Russian Paintings, London, November 26, 2006, sold for \$1,846,153), and the painting *The Harlot of Marseilles* (1923) sold in 2007 at Sotheby's for \$2,722,465 (Important Russian Pictures, London, November 28, 2007). Lastly, in 2009 Grigoriev's works crossed the millionth mark twice at Sotheby's: two fragments of the once integral signboard composition *Preparing Crepes* (circa 1935), produced for an Italian restaurant in New York, reached the price of \$1,258,500 (Russian Art, New York, April 22, 2009), and the portrait of his wife and son Kirill (*Mother and Child*, 1918) was sold for \$1,370,500 (Russian Art, New York, November 2, 2009). Such results for these paintings are understandable: impeccable provenance, themes and style highly characteristic of

the master, publications in editions about the artist issued during his life, participation in landmark exhibitions, and excellent quality of these works resulted in top prices. In 2009, even watercolors that possessed indicated characteristics were hitting almost a million in price (for example, a sheet from the *Faces of Russia* series, 1923, was acquired for \$986,500 at the same auction).

But, perhaps, the greatest success at Sotheby's in these years was achieved by the lots featured in the special session Important Russian Art within the Impressionist and Modern Art Auction (New York, November 3, 2008). Grigoriev's key paintings of the 1920s, once donated to the Berkshire Museum (Pittsfield, Massachusetts) by family member of the famous American philanthropist Charles Crane, were sold by the museum as "non-core" for its collection. Among them were *Shepherd of the Hills* from the *Raseya* series (1920) — an extremely rare example of a short but vibrant Berlin period of the artist's emigration (\$3,722,500); *Man with Pipe* (1922) — a typical example of the *Visages du Monde* cycle (\$1,142,500); *Binious (Pipe Players, 1924)* — the largest work of the *Brittany* cycle (\$3,218,500), which paradoxically combines the traditions of Russian academic tradition and the North European primitive, the ideas of French Cubism and the techniques of German 'new materiality'. This record high result of auction sales of Grigoriev is still not surpassed. Of course, the museum origin of the works and their inclusion in the global Modernist context, along with their brilliant provenance significantly fueled the buyers' interest in them.

3. Discussion

High prices for Grigoriev's work in mid-2000s induced the emergence of clearly falsified works in the antique market. Works of this kind circulated in Russian black antique market as early as in 1970s, when the halo of a forbidden émigré artist attracted a keen interest from collectors. The major Soviet collector of the Russian avant-garde George Costakis was the first to address the falsifications of Russian painting of the first decades of the twentieth century — he spoke about it in the 1950s. Incidentally, his collection also included Grigoriev's works — they were not subject of his special interest, so he easily parted with them by exchanging and donating. The Moscow-based collector S.V. Popov claimed (but perhaps it was just a myth) that he received Grigoriev's painting *In the Field* (1919–1920) from Costakis as a gift for his birthday in 1965 — but even a simple visual examination does not leave any doubt that it is fake. Over time, more five Grigoriev's work of the same quality entered this collection. Unfortunately, after the collector — a decent man who sincerely loved art — died in 2010, all these artworks

circulate in the antique market as genuine, since they are secured with famous Russian experts' reports and technological studies of European laboratories (Lorette Thomas, Paris). Some of them were offered to Sotheby's, but did not pass expert control — but smaller European auctions easily accepted them.

In the Western market, falsification of Russian art gained particular momentum in the second half of 1980s, after perestroika, as demand for Russian Modernism increased. Since this is a limited circle of artists, whose works are mainly located in Russia making their export hardly possible, the stake was on works disseminated across various countries and collections. Of course, this situation touched the Russian avant-garde to a greatest extent, since in the 1980s it received overwhelming success in the West. Gradually, the problem acquired a truly monumental scope with whole exhibitions and collections of fakes, also affecting the reputation of global auctions. An example of total falsification of avant-garde artworks is one of Christie's auctions organized by Wally Koresky in London, where all the artworks from Kurt Benedikt collection turned out to be fake. [10]

To help solve the problem of authenticity of artworks and their authorship would be to create a reference database of masters of Russian and international art. But not every major museum has materials for that, let alone its accessibility. For example, a joint project was launched by The Russian Avant-Garde Research Project foundation in Britain, Museum Ludwig in Cologne, and the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, aimed at the technical and technological analysis of the works of Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov that have impeccable provenance. This research is planned to lay the foundation for an electronic database that would include correspondence, digitized images of artworks, scholar commentary on them, as well as materials related to the activities of the USA auction houses in the 1945–1980 that sold Larionov and Goncharova's works. The project head is K. Akinsha. Such work with museum collections is a happy exception. Unfortunately, the project covers the work of only two artists. For example, a joint project was launched by The Russian Avant-Garde Research Project foundation in Britain, Museum Ludwig in Cologne, and the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, aimed at the technical and technological analysis of the works of Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov that have impeccable provenance. This research is planned to lay the foundation for an electronic database that would include correspondence, digitized images of artworks, scholar commentary on them, as well as materials related to the activities of the USA auction houses in the 1945–1980 that sold Larionov and Goncharova's works. The project head is K. Akinsha. Such work with museum collections is a happy exception. Unfortunately, the project covers the work of

only two artists. A wider selection of masters was included in another publication. [11] An important tool in expert work is the use of isotope mass spectrometry for the study of pigments, which was introduced to Russian scientific practice by E. Basner, A. Krusanov and S. Felitsyn and patented by the Eurasian Patent Organization (patent no. 0154489 B1) [12]. It allows to accurately determine the time of an artwork production, whether it was before or after the 1945 nuclear tests, which forever changed the chemical composition of pigments and binders used by painters. However, this technological method cannot solve the authorship issue, moreover it is extremely expensive due to the use of rare high-precision equipment. In any case, an expensive research is not performed during auction sales preparation; artworks are provided to the auctions with already existing expert reports.

Of course, the work of Boris Grigoriev — only partly related to the art of the Russian avant-garde — did not reach the price levels of Kandinsky, Malevich, Exter and other artists close to them, but a longstanding interest of collectors and the significant rise in prices for his works over the years stimulated a demand for his paintings and drawings, which for a long time were stored mainly in private collections. An illustrative example of the capitalization of Grigoriev's works by more than twenty times in sixteen years is a small gouache from the Latin American series *Ile de Paqueta, Breésil* (1936), sold for \$750 in 1992 (Modern & Contemporary Paintings, Drawings and Sculpture. Sotheby's. New York, June 12, 1992) and then for \$17,500 in 2008 Impressionist and Modern Art including Russian and Latin American Art. Sotheby's. New York. February 13, 2008.

Despite the traditionally careful selection of the artist's works for Sotheby's and Christie's auctions, dubious works occasionally appeared there. Some of them were auspiciously sold amid a general trend towards an increase in prices for Grigoriev's work. For example, at the 2008 Sotheby's auction in London (The Russian Paintings, June 10, 2008) two of the three proposed paintings were sold under the label 'from the artist's son's collection' (*Cattle at Rest*, \$34,412; *The Terrace of Villa Borisella, Cagnes-sur-Mer*, \$49,160), in fact having nothing to do with Grigoriev's brush. A more fortunate case for buyers took place at Sotheby's London auction in 2007 (Russian Art and Paintings, November 27, 2007): of the eleven erotic drawings by Grigoriev offered for sale (A Group of Erotic Drawings), purchased for \$80,539, four drawings turned out to be the work of his friend —Alexander Yakovlev, a bright draftsman, who addressed the erotic theme.

A very high level distinguishes the quality of the auction lots of Grigoriev in recent years; as a result, even pencil drawings are typically highly estimated in price (an example of erotic drawings belongs to this category). During his lifetime, the Russian

master earned the resounding glory as a brilliant draftsman, ‘the magician of the line’. Rich publication and exhibition history and an interest from buyers result in prices quite comparable with those for the European Modernists (Raoul Dufy, Henri Matisse, etc.). So, the sheet *Reading* (1916) from the *Intimité* series (published in the author’s book of the same name in 1918) reached the price of \$104,930 at Sotheby’s in 2013 (Russian Art, London, November 26, 2013), and the famous pencil *Portrait of Stanislavsky in the Role of Satin in the Play Lower Depths by M. Gorky* (1922) from *Visages de Russie* series (published in the artist’s book of the same name in 1923 and 1924) was sold for \$34,114 at Sotheby’s in 2016 (Russian Pictures. Including the Bar-Gera Collection of Soviet Non-Conformist Art, London, November 29, 2016).

Often the auctions feature Grigoriev’s work of museum level, sometimes unrepresentative of the master, therefore puzzling potential buyers. For example, in 2015 Sotheby’s presented a large-scale canvas *Ramayana* (1931) — one of the most unusual works by the artist on the motives of the ancient Indian epic (Russian Pictures. Including Works on Paper by Natalia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov, London, December 1, 2015). It demonstrates an unusual turn for an ironic, grotesque and even ‘sinister’ interpreter of the ‘Russian theme’. Grigoriev tried to symbolically convey ‘all of India’ in the generalizing image of Sita. Apart from the traditional vestments and the ancient Indian string instrument, there are no other ethnic details in the picture, but still it seemed too exotic for the master, who became famous for his Russian and Western images. For many years, the painting was part of a private collection in the Czech Republic, and having appeared at the auction at the estimate of £600,000–800,000 and at a generally low price level of these sales, it did not find its buyer.

On the contrary, Grigoriev’s portraits — a strong point in his work — have a sustained interest from buyers, especially if the models are the ‘icons’ of Russian culture. The portrait of the philosopher Lev Shestov (1922), painted in Paris in a somewhat harsh style close to the German ‘new materiality’, accurately expresses the dramatic tone of the era of upheaval. This approach of the artist to his sitter appealed to his European contemporaries, who saw the ‘portraits of souls, and cosmic stylizations’ in his images. The portrait of Shestov is one of the best among the philosopher’s iconography; reproduced many times in various émigré publications, it was out of sight of both specialists and collectors for many years. Its appearance at the auction market (Christie’s. Russian Art, London, 2016, June 6, 2016) did not cause a feverish demand, but became an important detail for reconstructing the body of the master’s main works.

Grigoriev’s images of children are constantly in demand in the antique market — apparently, due to the charm of the models themselves. Commissioned, for the most

part, the portraits of children reveal a particular gift of the artist to capture the essential qualities that further determined their fates. Such are *A Boy In A Sailor Suit* (circa 1923) (Sotheby's, Russian Art, New York, April 2011, \$782,500), a portrait of the twin sisters of the Cane family (1923) (Christie's, Russian Art, New York, April 13, 2011, \$1,314,500), and the *Portrait of a Boy* (early 1930s) (Christie's, Russian Art, London, June 2017, \$330,000).

His works of the late period (1928–1939) — so far, the least studied — have been of great interest in the auction market in the 2000s–2010s. These are mostly watercolors, gouache, and drawings created during his two long trips to the countries of South America, primarily Chile, where he reformed the National Academy of Arts and is considered the originator of a whole 'generation of artists of 1928'. Only a part of these works was demonstrated in Paris in 1937, most of them settled in private collections in the Americas after Grigoriev's last lifetime exhibition in New York (Lilienfeld Gallery, 1938). Due to the technique (watercolor or gouache on paper), their small size and the lack of consistency/continuity, these sheets have not had a high cost. In the mid-2010s, the Chilean period sometimes enters the general auction as a separate section with a commentary (Grigoriev. Chili. Russian Art. London, November 28, 2016), which enhances their value.

4. Conclusion

Auctions serve a backbone for the entire complex organism of the market of artistic values. It is here that the level of prices is established, the decrease or increase of which — in addition to the vicissitudes of the market — indicate well-defined patterns of price formation. The artistic value of artworks correlates with their monetary value in the market, and, on the contrary, their commercial value is based on their aesthetic qualities. The more interesting the artist's work is to the world of art, the more often it becomes the subject of art studies, — the higher its commercial value in the auction market can become over time (given the generally favorable economic climate, of course).

The circulation of the works by the Russian Modernist artist Boris Grigoriev in the international antique market for over forty years confirms the statement of Pierre Bourdieu, who argued that 'as the art market began to develop, writers and artists found themselves able to affirm the irreducibility of the work of art to the status of a simple article of merchandise and, at the same time, the singularity of the intellectual and artistic condition'. [13] Thus, the auction life of artworks is not only an important economic component of their histories, but also a result of a research of an artist's work of a certain period, and a resource for further research, attribution, and expert analysis.

References

- [1] *Christies*. The History of Christie's sales of Grigoriev. Retrieved October 23, 2019 from <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/searchresults.aspx?pid=temporariesoldlotsbanner&searchtype=p&action=paging&entry=grigoriev&pg=all>.
- [2] *Sothebys*. The History of Sotheby's sales of Grigoriev. Retrieved October 23, 2019 from <https://www.sothebys.com/en/search-results.html?query=grigoriev>.
- [3] Alvey, O. (2007). Selected Russian Artists and Sales – Grigoriev. *Art Auction Review*, September. Retrieved October 22, 2019 from <https://web.archive.org/web/20150811011650/http://www.artauctionreview.com/2007-09-RussianArtists-Grigoriev.pdf>
- [4] Shmidt, O. Yu. (Ed.) (1930). *Bolshaya Sovetskaya Encyclopediya* (1st ed.) vol. 19. Moscow: Sovetskaya entsiklopediya, p. 358.
- [5] Antipova, R. (2015). *Katalog pskovskoi vystavki Borisa Grigorieva 1989*. Moscow: Astreya-tsentr.
- [6] Stommels, S. (1993). *Boris Dmitrievich Grigoriev*. Nijmegen: Stommels & Lemmens.
- [7] Galeeva, T. (1995). *Boris Grigoriev*. Moscow: Galart.
- [8] Dudakov, V. (2003). Russkaia Zhivopis' i Khudozhestvennyi Rynok Velikobritanii. *Tretia Volna. Tretiakovskaia Galereia*, issue 1, pp. 94–103.
- [9] Galeeva, T. (2007). *Boris Dmitrievich Grigoriev*. St. Petersburg: Zolotoy vek.
- [10] Christie's. (1990). *A Selection of Russian Avant-Garde Works Formerly the Property of Kurt Benedikt*. London: Christie's.
- [11] Grenberg, Y., Pisareva, S. and Kalikova, I. (2017). *Anatomia Russkogo Avangarda. Vzgliad iz Laboratorii*. Moscow: Tri kvadrata.
- [12] Basner, Y. (2012). O printsipakh radiatsionnoi ekologii i problemakh datirovaniya zhivopisi XX veka. In Romanova N. M., et al. (Eds). *Expertisa, Otsenka I Strakhovanie Museinykh Predmetov*. St. Petersburg: Nestor-Istoriya, pp. 56–70.
- [13] Bourdieu, P. (1984). The Market of Symbolic Goods. In Bourdieu, P. *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 114.