

The Russian, Eastern & Oriental Fine Art Fair

This fair will take place in the Art Deco ballroom complex of London's Park Lane Hotel from 9 to 12 June, with a charity gala evening benefiting The Children's Fire & Burn Trust. It covers works of art from Byzantine icons and Asian antiques to contemporary art and is timed to take advantage of the large influx of buyers attending the sales, notably of Russian and Asian art, that take place at the city's major auction houses that week. This year, the event launches the Eastern Art Prizes, to be awarded to the best emerging artists from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Asia and the Middle East. The works of the 30 finalists will be displayed, the winners announced and prizes presented at the private view on 9 June. *Orientations* speaks to Peter London, director of the fair, about the connections between Russia and Asian art.

Orientations: With three other art fairs taking place in London this June, how does yours distinguish itself?

Peter London: Ours is the only fair in Europe, probably in the world, to showcase fine art from the region stretching from Eastern Europe to East Asia, which includes some of the wealthiest countries. Our focus is specific, which in itself attracts great interest. Last year, we welcomed numerous Russian, Arab, Indian, Chinese and Japanese collectors from around the world. This

year's promises to be a sumptuous event, held in one of the largest and most glamorous exhibition spaces in central London. Roughly 60 percent of our exhibitors are from the UK, with 40 percent based in Russia, the US, continental Europe and Asia.

O: What is the connection between the art of the three geographical regions represented?

PL: There is a strong synergy between Russian and Middle Eastern art, although it may not be immediately obvious. Both traditions are rooted in Byzantine culture. In Russia, this first manifested itself in the development of a rich history of icon painting. The arts of the Middle East retain the influence of Byzantium, despite not depicting humans or engaging in idol worship; the use of rich colours, patterns and geometric motifs could be named as examples. This art tends to focus on the history of the regions. Consequently, the fair's theme will revolve around the Silk Road, which stretched to Europe from East Asia, via northern Persia and Central Asia, a powerful reminder of the age-old links between these regions. There will be a wonderful display of Uzbek *chapan* coats, made with Russian silks and brocades, which will be complemented by a beautiful array of textiles and carpets from Asia.

O: Why are Russian collectors increasingly interested in Asian



The ballroom complex of the Park Lane Hotel, London, where The Russian, Eastern & Oriental Fine Art Fair will be held

art, and which categories are they most interested in?

PL: As high-end Russian works of art become scarcer, Russian buyers look to markets outside their own country. Roman Abramovich, owner of Chelsea Football Club and ranked number 50 in the 2010 Forbes 'rich list', has started to collect Western artists such as Freud and Bacon. The broad appeal of Asian art across all disciplines now attracts 'new' Russian money. However, the leading Russian buyers collect only the best –

they are not interested in second-tier artists or works of art that are not of the highest quality. It is easier to sell a perfect and sought-after Ming vase for a high-figure sum than, say, a pair of lesser Tang horses at a bargain price. Notably, there seems to be a keen interest in Meiji works of art in general, and in metalware and lacquerware in particular.

O: Do these collectors view Asian art mainly as an investment?

PL: Serious Russian collectors do not buy works of art merely as investments. Unlike many others, Russians don't stack their paintings on top of wardrobes or hide them away in bank vaults; the majority prefer to display their prized art works to be admired by all, as they should be. The real collectors are not interested in selling, only acquiring!

O: How do you envision the future of the fair?

PL: It will be a focus for Asian art at the height of the London summer season. At present, the only other major event in the UK is Asian Art in London, which takes place in November. The inauguration of a summer counterpart is long overdue! We will continue to show a mixture of Russian, Asian and Eastern art. However, I envisage the growth of the fair to be in the market for Asian art, particularly in fine art and antiques.