

The New York Times

THE NEW YORK TIMES ARTS/ENTERTAINMENT SATURDAY, APRIL 1, 1989

Chemiakin, Once Forced Into Exile, Returns to Soviet Art World a Star

By FRANCIS X. CLINES

Special to The New York Times

MOSCOW, March 31 — Eighteen years ago, Mihail Chemiakin was an artist forced into exile for "ideological subversion" in refusing to paint in what he still sneers at as the "heroic eunuch" style of officially approved Soviet realism.

He was summarily denied a farewell phone call to his parents, and, to avoid another bout of the drugs and ennuis he had suffered in psychiatric detention, left the country, as he recalls it, "with my dog and two dried apples, which I used for a still life."

Last week Mr. Chemiakin came back to his birthplace from New York for the first time since then, happily greeted by long lines of Muscovites waiting to see his retrospective at one of the establishment showcase museums, the Central House of the Artist. He found a second major show under way in Leningrad of the early works he had had to leave behind as he fled, paintings now hailed as major works in the once forbidden Soviet school of nonconformists.

"I never got to the point of offending the regime; I only got to the point of offending my local policeman," said the 49-year-old artist, recalling the hard past even as he dealt with the honors of rehabilitation, notably Raisa Gorbachev's unannounced visit this week to his show. The visit made him savor the contrast with a past occasion of political esthetics, Nikita S. Khrushchev's fist-waving denunciation of avant-garde artists as "faggots."

"Before, I was afraid of being trampled by the authorities, and now I'm afraid of being smothered in embraces," Mr. Chemiakin said wryly, squinting through the smoke of his cigarette.

With his personal turnabout occurring in the midst of the startling national elections, Mr. Chemiakin has the look of a man caught in a kind of mardi gras swirl, a celebration with a potentially dark edge. He is pleased, but he is wary, too, having made sure to receive his final naturalization papers as an American citizen a day before he left behind his country home in Claverack, N.Y., and his loft in the SoHo section of Manhattan.

"I'm very happy to give a number of people an attack of the bile for re-

turning as a success," said the artist, dressed all in black leather, from cap to shiny boots. After five hurried days here and in his beloved Leningrad, he presented reflections worthy of a mirror shard, bright with hope, jagged with uncertainty, about "these suffering people," as he says with somewhat removed affection, perhaps, of his native land.

The painter basks in the contrast from past disfavor.

glasses," he said. "I see many problems, a very tense atmosphere, with people not sure all the changes will last. I'm not interested in bleating joyfully over what's happening. But I welcome the changes. It's the first attempt at democracy."

Too Much Perestroika?

Change, of sorts, has been sweeping the art world more quickly than the ballot booth, and in this Mr. Chemiakin complains that perestroika may "sometimes be too free" in the early chic that is evolving. "Too much froth is rising to the top," he says, as Western dealers angle to cash in on the new openness. "It's to be expected, but I don't think it's a very healthy atmosphere right now."

The artist said his concern is that Russian art not yield to the ephemera of the art markets, but keep its focus on the long years of labor, technique and study required to be well grounded in the painter's basics. "Just as Russian ballet is," he said. "Severe in its training. In the West, one great shortcoming is they have not gotten this training."

The artist recalled his early days "shoveling snow and garbage by day, painting by night." He recalls his first exhibition in 1961 at the Osipov Insane Asylum, where the authorities, displeased with his contumely toward Soviet realism, had him treated with drugs. One day he was marched to a large auditorium where numerous paintings by patient-inmates were hung on the walls so psychology students could analyze them.

Mr. Chemiakin spoke in a monotone of the Osipov bureaucrats of

"I'm not one for rose-colored



Associated Press

Mihail Chemiakin, left, who was exiled from the Soviet Union in 1971 but later asked to exhibit his paintings in Moscow, at exhibition last week with Serge Sorokko, who handles the artist's work in the United States.

continued:

yore. "They're still alive," he said, stressing that they are most likely busy now adapting to the new era with impunity. "It's an old Russian tradition to blame someone already dead for today's problems," he said. "We say why? Why? But we never name names. That's why, for me, it's still frightening."

More than settling past accounts, Mr. Chemiakin betrays a zeal for the present. Long an opponent of the Soviet incursion in Afghanistan, the artist is now leading an international campaign to account for 300 Soviet soldiers missing or taken prisoner. He has also begun publishing a new

magazine, *Art of Russia* and the West, through a nonprofit foundation in an attempt to fill in some mutual gaps in cultural understanding.

"Russian artists of the post-Stalin period had many problems with Western and American art historians," he said. "There was a common opinion there was no art of interest then. They forgot that you can kill millions of people, but not their spirit. The Russian avant-garde of that time was much broader than imagined. There were powerful masters who were our teachers. They showed masterpieces in their apartments, while we painted at night in basements and attics."

But Mr. Chemiakin pleads neither nostalgia for the creativity engendered by repression nor ambivalence about his current success. "I never broke off work on the Russian themes," said the artist, noting, for example, a current project in his New York studio inspired by the repressed poetry of a friend who died here 30 years ago. On the other hand, he is not tempted to move back now that he is officially acceptable. At the opening of his retrospective, he was carefully introduced as "an American master and son of Russia."

"We lost many soldiers but the non-conformists are victorious today," he said. "I am very happy."