

ANALYTICAL ARTICLES

RECOLLECTIONS OF CONTEMPORARIES

THE HIERAT

I call my works "hieratures". My thing is hieratism.
 I am an hierat – the term came to me in a vision. I am an hierat, he through whom the universal stream of signs passes. I signify a silent name – the Sign of the Spirit of the Lord. I form an hierature by the meeting of a myriad of signs and the sacrificial changing of emblematic metamorphoses. The mystical experience of man is architectonically compressed in the hierature.
 The hierature is born ecstatically. The signs of the mystical experience are displayed by the national consciousness, fore-memory, fore-consciousness.
 I create a new, non-verbal language of the third millennium. While I, an hierat, have still not been born to death, I say out loud:
 The language of the third millennium is formed and crowned
 by the acts of the hieratures.
 Mikhail Shvartsman¹

I. APPROACHES

Mikhail Matveyevich Shvartsman was a living legend of post-war Moscow art. A legend in the double sense of the word: a poetified myth and, wholly in keeping with the original meaning of the medieval Latin, an unavoidable imperative or challenge. In Latin, *Legenda* means, literally, what should be read.

The sources of the Shvartsman legends lie in the alternative culture of the 1960s, charged with the energy of uncensored artistic innovation, audacious experiments and a radical reappraisal of the role of art and the vocation of artist. Back then, the painting and personality of the master from Moscow was spoken about with "fear and trepidation". Everything was different – the world of his images, his views on the role of the artist, the school of hieratic art and, finally, independence; that rectitude of solitude with which he defended his "exorbitant" (as it seemed to his contemporaries) pretensions. Russian artist Ilya Kabakov recalled: "The impact of his 'canvases', 'countenances' and 'architectural fantasies' was completely captivating, hypnotising. Anyone who attended his 'showings' – not exhibitions, which Mikhail Shvartsman avoided and completely consciously, but his home showings, always late at night, in artificial light – knows this sensation of intercourse with something unprecedented, unseen, unheard-of, something not made by human hands and, most importantly, incognisable for the simple human being. This was the most important sensation – the lack of correspondence between everything shown to you and in front of you and your human understanding, knowledge, in general with your human essence... The small room where he lived, filled with these 'metamorphoses', turned into a temple; exhibited next to one another, the paintings turned into a new iconostasis."²

Ilya Kabakov's recollections, deliberately verging on the grotesque, offer a clear opportunity to replace the legend with a myth or fable. The fable of the artist as hermit, icon-painter,

unacknowledged genius or ecstatic shaman immersed in an archaic syncretism of religious-magical outlooks on creativity. All these fabrications were frequently caught up by the near-artistic talk. However, the legend did not disappear. Quite the opposite: Shvartsman's first lifetime exhibitions not only opened to the public one of the most interesting artists in Moscow, they also evoked attempts to read his missive. The attempts vary from the delighted to the sceptical. The legend again clashes with rumour linked to local myths. Newspaper commentators and reviewers vied with one another to speak about "the most enigmatic and honest master of the generation of the 1960s" or "a closed artist whose works were known only to a narrow circle of connoisseurs and fans", who "enjoyed the reputation of a great recluse", who "consciously selected for himself the path of hermit service of his art, requiring neither recognition nor abuse" and who "regarded himself as either the only or the last genius of the twentieth century."

After Mikhail Shvartsman's death, a surge of the local mythology yet another time, only with even greater force, attempted to transfer the artist from the world of art into the world of esotericism, hysterics and irresponsible speculations. Some hurried to elevate him to the rank of "patriarch of catacomb art"; others attempted to give him the title of "cosmic artist", who "only employed mundane painterly resources to reproduce the divine revelations and a prayer incarnated in colour and form." Still others affirmed that Shvartsman's pictures were not in fact pictures, but a "universal riddle, which once or twice every century troubles contemporaries." They said that Shvartsman's followers called him a "supreme priest in the temple of art" and a "creator imbibing everything created by world culture", as if even now "he follows us and hopes that we will not squander his wealth, but will assimilate and transfer it into future intelligent hands."

The myth turned the artist's apartment into a "secret sanctuary", his pictures into windows into an invisible world and the master himself into an enigmatic guru, who reputedly lived for decades in the world of his own visions, expressed the inexpressible, thought the unthinkable and resolved unsolvable problems. These epic characteristics

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were fortified by hyperbole; conjecture was fortified by hints that a special initiation was required in order to understand Shvartsman's pictures, for only those familiar with the mystical experience of mankind could approach this painting and that no explanations, not even the most verbose ones, were capable of shedding light on the true spiritual essence of the hieratures.

Biographical Correctives

All these literary fantasies have little in common with the real Mikhail Shvartsman. Although he consciously and responsibly avoided the various intrigues and compromises accompanying the censored exhibitions, he was no hermit. The doors of his house were always open to his numerous friends and acquaintances – for the showing of pictures, unhurried and fascinating conversations or merry get-togethers. He was full of life, artistic, charming, smiling and witty. He had a free command of all registers of conversation, easily crossing from high phrases to boyish jokes. Like a true Olympian, however, he always remained exacting and fastidious. The word “quality” never disappeared from his lexicon – with regard to art, all means of expression or human relationships. Notwithstanding his childish ability to experience hurt and ability to remember an insult, he remained a maximalist. Quality produced its own authentic forms; not the other way around. He rejected all formalism and stylisation.

This demanding maximalism helped him to confirm his own path in art as a service and witness – a confirmation taken to an extreme. Not just any service, but high priestly service. Not just any witness, but a prophetic witness. Yet without any inverted commas, subtexts, double entendres or ironic beginnings. No fears, masquerades or maskings and, as a direct result, no falling off. High priest, prophet, service, witness – each of these words is sacred, intimate and extremely serious. Each is confirmed by piety, gratitude, delight, labour, mastery and faith. The course of the river of times comes from humble and proud loyalty to them – the constancy of labours and days, the regulated and exact movements of the pen across the paper, the medium-like efforts of the fingers, rubbing in the paint, the teasing artisticism and, finally, the seductive and risky unmeasured nature of his own artistic predilections: “I am an hierat, he through whom the universal stream of signs passes ... Through the meeting of a myriad of signs and the sacrificial changing of emblematic metamorphoses, I form the hierature ... I create the new, non-verbal language of the third millennium.”

When thinking in such categories and scales, an orientation on “catacombs” and “catacomb art” did not have any meaning for Mikhail Shvartsman. Loyalty to the hieratic witness always protected him from any social hang-ups – joining the Union of Artists, illegal exhibitions or group actions of the Moscow nonconformists. His cardinal refusal to participate in local public movements contributed to the myth of the anchorite-artist, protecting himself from the pressure of the regime by seclusion. Yet Shvartsman never complained of any pressure. He remained quite free and strong, maintaining the balance of his own world. This world included a multitude of the most diverse artistic activities. After graduating with the degree of monumental artist from the Moscow School of Art (the former Stroganov School) in 1956, he “did everything – frescoes, books, posters, advertisements and trademarks.” In 1966, after working at the Combine of Decorative Art for ten years, he accepted the invitation to head the department of graphic art at the Light Industry Bureau of Designers, where for almost twenty years he led a group of artists engaged in designing trademarks. He contributed to his first one-man show at the Tretyakov Gallery in 1994, where he demonstrated his hieratures, on the eve of his seventieth

birthday.

Word and Image

The literary transformations of Shvartsman's deeds, words and personality into the grotesque, a mass-media fable or esoteric kitsch cannot, of course, be explained simply by ill intentions, apologetic zeal, the triumph of neophytes or mere stupidity. The Moscow/Petersburg myth of Mikhail Shvartsman is, above all, a defensive gesture; a response to the challenge to the local traditions of understanding art thrown down by the artist.

The difficulties with “what should be read”, experienced by professional art critics engaged in interpreting the oeuvre of the Moscow hierat, are far more serious than those with which the singers of esoteric revelations have straightened out. It is now clear that the former means of describing Shvartsman's artistic heritage – the tools of classical art history, postmodernist playful strategies or religious-mystical and metaphysical speculations – are of no use. None of these networks embrace either what is important or what is evident. There is a very good reason for this. Shvartsman's oeuvre cannot be reduced to mere “esoteric practice”, the “programmed replacement of the picture by the new icon” or the “appropriation of abstract art”. There is simply nothing to be done here with ready approaches, devices, schemes and methods tested out on other materials. That is why we agree with the author of an article on Shvartsman that for a new generation of critics raised on Conceptualist dogma, “the problem of the choice of language of description acquired a dramatic character.”³

Mikhail Shvartsman was neither a Conceptualist nor a forerunner of Conceptualism. There is, however, nothing particularly dramatic about this for the modern critic. An interpretation of hieratic art does not require any rejection of the experience of Moscow Conceptualism. On the contrary, the talk is of a common cultural source – the special attention of the Moscow artists towards the interdependence of the image and the word in acts of communicative, interpretative and performative speech practices. Shvartsman was one of the first to discover this link between the verbal and the visual. He was also one of the first to introduce it into his own art. This explains his special hieratic school, his “rituals” of showing his works, his “instructive” texts and his students, who still engage in ongoing dialogue with the master today.

This was not the introduction of a text into the world of images, as in icons, folk prints, posters or comics, but the conjunction of the image and the word of the artist, allowing the viewer to fully articulate his own imagination and spontaneity within the bounds of prearranged conditions. Shvartsman eventually abandoned the thought of a statement in the form of a treatise (*Book of Hieratism*). His numerous observations, scattered throughout his notebooks, were not intended to be transformed into any finished text. The reason was not because technical reasons prevented their author from doing so. And not even because Shvartsman's quest for laconic, elliptically exact formulae and aphoristically sharp characteristics endowed with “insightful succinctness” coincided closely with the romantic aesthetics of the fragment.

The definitive element for Shvartsman was not the text at all and certainly not abstract theory, but what he himself called “language”. The language of the art itself and, above all, the “new verbal language of the third millennium, formed and crowned by acts of hieratures.” The artistic statement was closely linked to this language – appeals to a special type of discourse charge the picture with the dominant of the artist's interpretation. The language of art on art? Yes, because the contents of the interpretations and the discourse (the system of hidden rules and self-limitations, by means of which the constructions of events and meanings were arranged, functional segments were formed and discursive practices and acts of speech were unfolded) clearly coincided. No matter what the theme was – be it, for example, the compact and sacral nature of language – each time Shvartsman referred to

completely definite possibilities: “A new, non-verbal language, the hieratic language, broadens the possibility of self-cognition, of knowledge as a mystical reality and of compactness as one of the multitude of signs, yet it is extremely important for the future.”

Both the possibilities (of self-cognition and knowledge) and the signs refer not to “language in general”, but to discourse. Unlike language, discourse is a condition of only one definite way of making a statement and their links and correlations. Even if the word “statement” implies not only a word, but also a non-verbal painterly artistic practice with all its “metamorphoses”, “flows of signs” and “acts of hieratures”. This discourse establishes the positional unity for the scattered multitude of statements and forms the systematic context. It establishes the borders, demarcates the zones of reticence, sets the enquiries, repetitions, rhetorical codes, rules of inter-textual links and the refined techniques of reading-and-translating intentions, which are both easy to discover and to hide. Discourse manifests in the status of contents those special qualities which require their own form. Thinking in art and thinking about art coincide here.

Self-Interpretation as Identity

Appealing to discourse does not imply seeking answers beyond the bounds of the picture. The picture, the painting and art did not exist *per se* for Shvartsman outside the given discourse. We are dealing here with stubborn, basic dimensions. The talk is not merely about the artist's opinions, which do not lay any claim to be obligatory, despite their enticing attractiveness for art-critical interpretations. In the Shvartsman legend, the talk is of something much greater – self-titles, self-understanding and self-interpretation as a programmed manifestation of authenticity. The hieratic artist was unbending here.

Any alternative view or perception sooner or later ran up against this unbending nature – and still does to this day. Hence the difficulties with the languages of description and analysis. Shvartsman unhesitatingly contrasted the arbitrariness and self-lawful logics of “alien” languages with his own “hieratic concept (hieratonics)”, cutting off any attempts to take the conversation about his oeuvre beyond the bounds of the set discourse.

Purely aesthetic interpretation was rejected. The artist decisively regarded this approach as profaned and profaning; something lying outside his own tasks, experience and the logic of their resolution. No autonomous aesthetic, cult of artisticism or gastronomic tastiness. In his eyes, all this looked like a lowering substitution. He believed that aestheticising delight at the beauty of new hieratic forms led to purely artistic use of the “hieratic attributes”. The artist wrote: “The beauty of these forms is not the projection or operation of attributes; they are born of sign-extraction in a chain of hieratic metamorphoses. I particularly underline that operations with hieratic attributes is immaturity in the aesthetic sense... Hieratonics is a holy action (liturgising) gives ecstatic birth to a sign. While attributes also arise in the hieratic sign, they do not give themselves up to thematical definition.”

Membership of the fundamental movements in twentieth-century art was rejected with equal energy. Shvartsman never defined his oeuvre as non-objective (not even in analogy with pure, instrumental music). He did not call himself an abstractionist and did not classify his art as abstract painting. This was perhaps inevitable. He regarded himself as an artist of the new millennium and not the past, historically depleted movements. Herein lies an explanation of the idea of the “post-abstract process of synthesis” as “unity in the battle of the Suprematist with the plastic” – a movement from the subconscious to the conscious in indissoluble interaction with the “over-conscious”.

Shvartsman insisted on a radical defamiliarisation of his art. Defamiliarisation as the overcoming of the “abnormalities” of modern painting. He regarded these abnormalities – deformation, grotesque, sharp characterism, expression or Surrealist effects – as the lowest form of defamiliarisation. Such forms were doomed to inglorious extinction. He himself aspired towards the highest degrees – self-witnesses of reality “not of this world”. He regarded the hieratic sign as such a witness: “A congregationally introduced image (even if it is thickened by one single personality, for it is hierarchic both in thickening and on the levels of manifestation) ... by the work of the resurrecting memory – the transformation of the eternal, the pathetic dialectics of movement through the layers of culture, by emblems left to themselves in past incarnations.” As the past indicates death then, according to another formula, “defamiliarisation is the passing through death for the sake of resurrection in an hieratic image.”

Shvartsman lent cardinal importance to self-interpretation – an explanation of the idiosyncrasies of his oeuvre, his own stance in art and his relationship with modern trends in art. Any compromise was completely excluded. The exact interpretation of his own deeds was a programmed manifestation of identity. Shvartsman could not imagine himself or his oeuvre outside this exactness. Indrzych Halupecki once wrote in his notes on his meetings with Moscow artists that Shvartsman did not want to speak about his art, but did want his work to be regarded as a religious act. The Czech art critic called the Moscow hierat a “traditionalist” and referred to his countenances as “heads”, comparing them to Australian cave drawings and African masks.⁴ He immediately received the following rebuke from the artist: “I am deeply alien to ‘traditionalism’, which is, today, only self-destruction. I have never produced ‘planar stylisations’, for the course of my fate has inevitably taken me away from them into a congregational-hieratic course ... Always paying my dues to the imaginative power of the Aborigines and Negroes, I believe that those individual specimens in which the mind manages to rise up above the subconsciousness and sensual magism are highly instructive. My aim is the proto-image, i.e. the trace of the Spirit, and the meditative course sweeps aside external associations. Imaginations are also typical of the hierographies of my working process ... The countenances, which you call ‘heads’, are merely one of several cycles – the Hierarchy cycle. These works are not ‘schemes realising colour processes’ and hieratic signs. The nature of the scheme is given. In my signs, form-line-colour are immanent and develop organically, gradually and unforeseen, right up until the very end of the work. It is the organics of an hieratic sign – and not a pre-conceived scheme. Neither are they Masks. Masks in Russian are ‘guises’, i.e. an expression of the demonic. That is not my sphere ... I would like to think that these observations might find in you a favourable understanding and do not offer grounds for erroneous judgements on something that is sacred to me. But if, contrary to expectation, these thoughts contradict the concepts of your article, I would prefer to postpone the publication on me.”

All these rejections and repudiations – stances, disagreements, demarcations and corrections – no doubt mean little to a reader only superficially acquainted with Shvartsman’s heritage. Why cannot the pictures called “hieratures” and “countenances” by the artist be perceived as, first and foremost, painting? Is that so much? Besides the artist’s labels, is painting not allowed to lead its own life? Does it not have its own development, for example, from figurativeness (countenances) to abstraction (hieratures)? And finally, if one bears in mind the visually given characteristics – correlation of background, side-wings and central images, presence of a vertical axis, colour contrasts accompanied by tonal equilibrium, plastic organisation of the construction of the volumes and masses – is it so very important to lead this quite traditional, albeit highly original and instantly recognisable painting

beyond the bounds of purely painterly issues?

For Shvartsman, such an approach remained hopelessly “attributive”, failing to embrace anything essential or “substantial” in his art. What remained, then, of the authenticity of his artistic tongue? He laid claim to more than just “painting” or a “picture” in his art. He consistently contrasted anthropomorphism, deforming arbitrariness and the caprices of artistic wilfulness with a trusting reconciliation before the undoubted reality of Presence. The signs of this Presence were his hieratures. The artist often repeated: “I do not feel the slightest urge to make geometric, stereometric, perspective and spatial focuses.” His service and witness were based on a strong belief in the “substantial meaning of things, and not an impression of them.”

Analysis of the Discursive Field

It would be incorrect, however, to think that if Mikhail Shvartsman’s oeuvre was permeated with a powerful gravitation field of his own self-interpretation, nothing remains for the viewer – art historian, critic, connoisseur or simply lover of art – but to agree to the role of diligent rewriter-commentator. No, that role is not fatal. Whatever the case, Shvartsman the living legend, inexhaustible imperative and summons of “what should be read” was not required of this.

The “reading” was nothing other than the imitative reproduction of the artist’s own discourse. Genuinely serious attention to it implied not apologetics, esotericism or some special hermetism, but a systematic analysis supported by contrasts with other (above all mixed or typological similar) discourses. The task of this analysis is to designate its borders, establish links with other statements and to elucidate the mechanisms of excluding such forms of expression.⁵

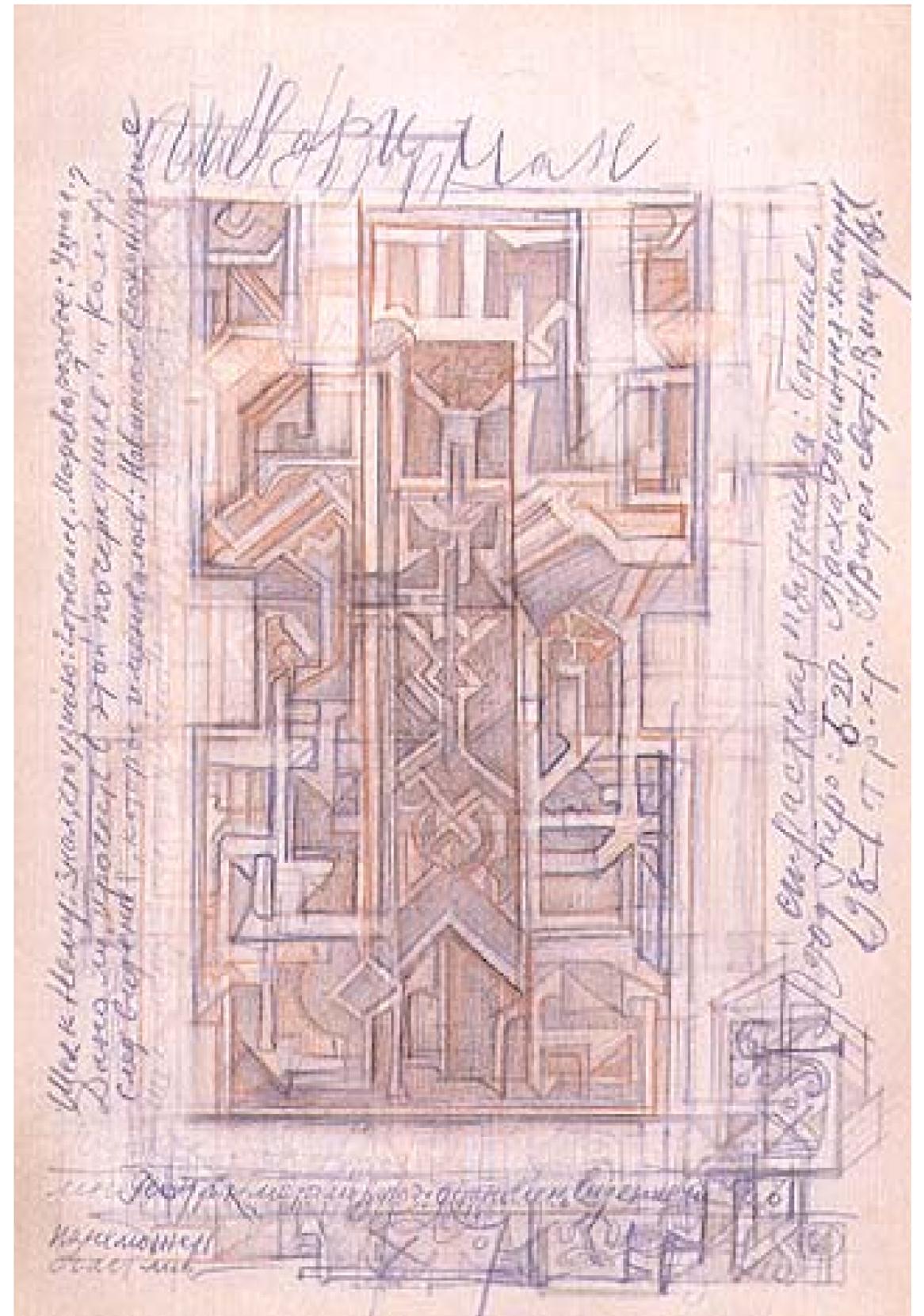
Series of key words – sign, signs of the promise, hierature, hierat, hieratonics, hieratic and hierarchies – set the preceding and most general characteristics of Shvartsman’s discourse. While this list can be extended, the matter does not now lie in fully exhausting this series of words. What is important is that in the artist’s vocabulary, there words are, on the one hand, equally related to theory and practice or craft and, on the other, that they all, to one extent or another, signify the sacred, spiritual, holy and innermost.

Their contextual use unambiguously characterises Shvartsman’s discourse as a Gnostic form of discourse. The sign refers back to an emblem, while the emblem refers back to knowledge or Gnosis. Knowledge received as a revelation from other sources – spiritual and hidden from a superficial gaze, although mysterially revealed. Knowledge and the sign coincide here, just as the matter of the Gnostic and the artist-hierat coincides. The sign of the Spirit is the hieratic sign. And vice versa. The hieratic sign is the sign of the Spirit. As hieratic signs are strictly hieratic, the hieratic structure of images are, by necessity, iconic. As Shvartsman himself wrote: “The hierat does not name the sign and is not tempted by a verbal name, for in its essence it creates the silent name Hiera-sign ... Everything will be told in its own time and in its own place. The summoned initiated will read the entire mystical text of the given incarnation of the hierat.”

Initiation points to the other initiated. Gnosis points to a new birth, new kinship⁶ and congregationality. Congregationality points to a new mystery of the turning of art into hieratics. Taken together, this forms the hieratic universe – a world full of special meanings of the

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II. THE HIERATIC UNIVERSE

Mikhail Shvartsman's hieratic sphere is self-sufficient and all-embracing. It includes a concept of art, doctrine, poetics, art practice, event of a sign not reducible to language and speech, fate, a means of self-interpretation and expectation of the viewer's return, discerning a reading of all the aspects of meaning. As we have already noted, the system-formative principle of this sphere is the hieratic Gnosis. Its structure is considerably richer than the general formula to which a typological description of one of the branches of the Moscow art of the 1960s and 1970s is usually reduced – religious metaphysics + existentialism. Shvartsman has different sources: "The hierat ... walks in the labyrinths of culture as Ariadne's thread." The viewer appears to have been equally dependent on this thread. The artist himself was convinced that the more original an artist is, the deeper his roots are. But what do these "roots" mean? Historical precedents? Succession, memory, overcoming?

The simplest answer lies in the unanimous opinion of viewers: "Mikhail Shvartsman's pictures are amazingly beautiful ... inspecting them provides great pleasure ... they recall..." Yet the quest for "re-collections" – the quest for parallels, analogues and similarities – is incapable of providing a proper reply. Yes, such recollections are inevitable and worthy of attention. But as a universal strategy of explanations, they easily turn into one of the convenient attempts to veer away from the living legend of Shvartsman – from what constitutes the essence of the imperative and challenge of his entire artistic system, which requires itself to be read as its own, special contents.

These contents do not, of course, nullify the succession. One can therefore understand those who encounter Shvartsman's unique art and seek links with past artistic worlds in his painting. Some refer to the archaics of ancient magical signs, the representativeness of heraldry and the graphicness of hieroglyphics. Others recall French Post-Cubist painting or Pavel Filonov. Still others seek traces of Cranach, Vermeer, Mikhail Vrubel and Wassily Kandinsky or point to the icon, fresco and Old Russian wooden fretwork. And so on and so on. Each of these analogues is no doubt correct. One can indeed discern traces of the sculpture of Vladimir and Suzdal, Western medieval book miniatures and the architectonic austerity of church icons in the "countenances". Renaissance motifs, the Filonov tradition of illustration and contemporary experimentation can be seen in his graphic art of the 1960s. The hieratures contain elements of the fresco painting of Dionysius, mosaic smalt and stone incrustation.

While knowing the secret of the charm and beauty of the past, Shvartsman himself never counted himself among the passéists or someone enchanted by the magic of museums. In the past, he saw the witnesses of the common hieratic experience and the traces of hieratic dedications: "We find the tokens of the hieratic with the Egyptians, in old icons and even in neolithics, but try to be able to find (meditate-relax), enticken the sign of the Spirit, find the hieratic sphere, not through science (it is far from everything), but through a real mystic experience. Develop, ultimately, a method of things and so on, and so on, and so on. God has always had everything!" This vision immediately excluded any stylisation. The talk was not of "historical memories" or mannerist reminiscences, but the living natural element of the fore-memory – creative witnesses transforming the past linking us to the future. In this horizon, the past becomes not only not so much a prerequisite as a pledge and an assignment.

"Only that which is perceived as always being is organic and prolific."

Sources

In order to understand the meaning of these pledges and assignments of the past for Mikhail Shvartsman's hieratic art, the first thing to do is to reject two affirmations false in their straightforwardness and simplicity (both have long since become stamps). The first is interpreting Shvartsman's art as a continuation of Malevich's heritage or, wider, as a continuation of the art of the classical Russian avant-garde of the first third of the twentieth century. The second is attributing to Shvartsman the creation of a "new religious art", a "new religious canon", "new icons" or "new iconostases". Both affirmations are decisively rejected by the artistic stance of the Moscow hierat. On the one hand, unusual attention to the art of past (which was not a feature of the avant-garde). On the other hand, movement forwards into the future (which is not and never was a feature of modernist stylisations of "religious art" or the jocular plagiarism of postmodernism).

All this does not mean, however, that icons, modernism and the avant-garde should be immediately excluded from the zone of attention. On the contrary. The talk is of the succession of a more complicated feature – an hierat following Ariadne's thread in the labyrinths of cultures.

The viewer can also step into these labyrinths.

Icon?

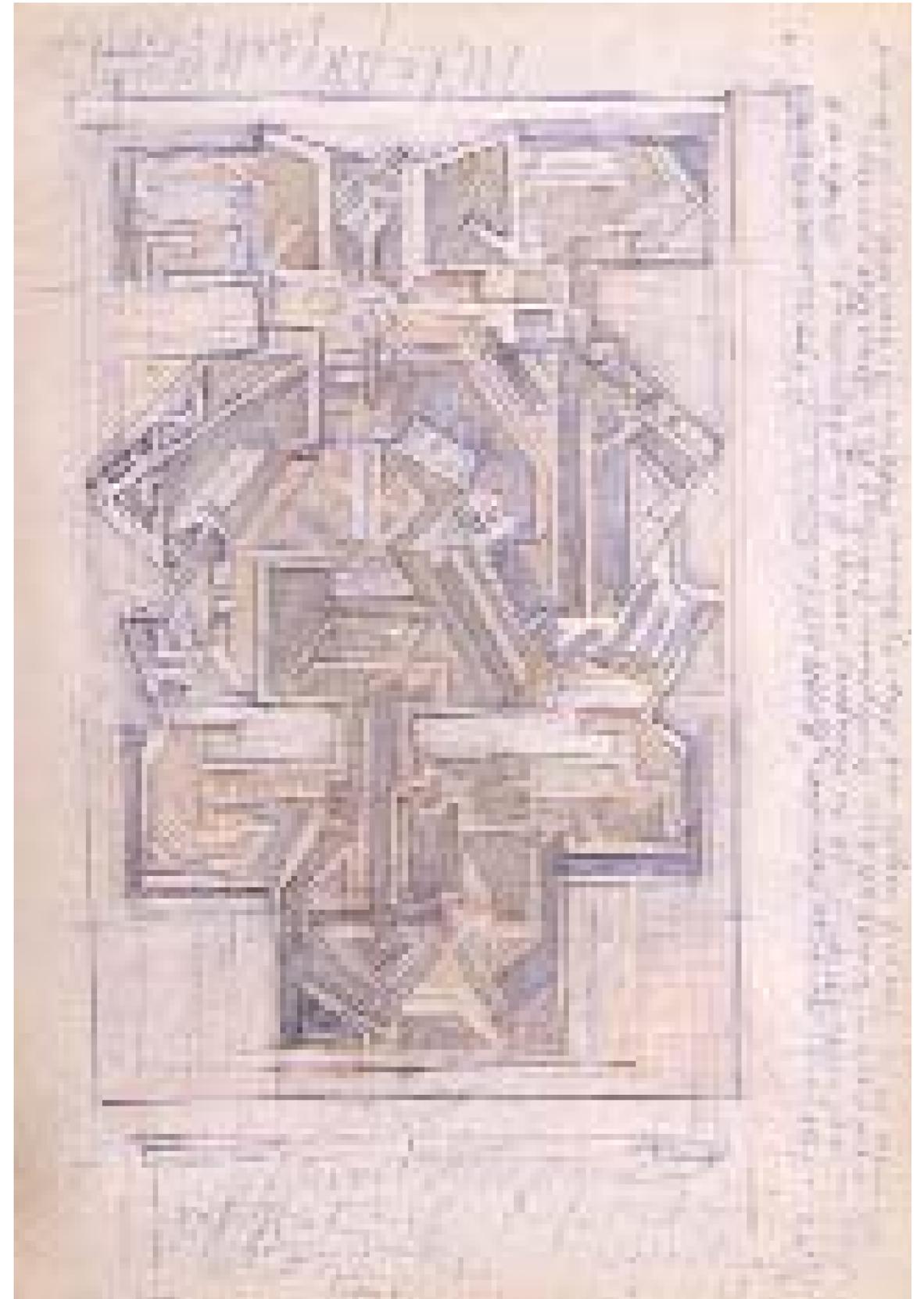
Although Mikhail Shvartsman often reiterated that he did not paint icons, the real source of his hieratic art is undoubtedly the icon. The artist recalled: "In my first years at the school of art, I was interested in Byzantine and Old Russian art, frescoes and icons. Some student friends and I got together to quietly discuss the art of icon-painting. We even organised an expedition to the St Ferapont and St Cyril Monasteries in northern Russia."

The icon revealed to Shvartsman the vision of art as an ontological union of the holy, the grace and the ascetic. The holy lies not only in the images of the revelation of the coming transformation of the world, but also in the everyday being and presence of these images in congregational sacred actions, where everything is a sign of the sacramental and the hieratic. The grace is like a special charismatic action which, in the words of St Diadochos of Photiki, "when indeed the intellect begins to taste the goodness of the All-Holy Spirit with great awareness, then we ought to know that grace is beginning to paint, as it were, the likeness over the image."⁷ The ascetic is like a form of self-testing on the path of the "discernment of spirits" and the mystical knowledge of the Other, opened by the experience of dying for the world.

The icon also provides the vital stance in art. On the one hand, creative estrangement from the temptations of this world, fear and a nihilistic relationship with art; on the other, interaction with a new existence, the sacrament of the most profound concentration and,

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finally, the opportunity to fly above the slag-heap of epigones and stylisers. This stance is also predefined by one of the designations of his work (“isography”) and his place and role (“I am an isographer”).

The icon prompted the most important elements of Shvartsman’s artistic technique – board, hollow, levkas, tempera, and the painting over of old images with new ones. The artist’s painterly poetics also date back to the icon. The latter is best expressed in his own words: “High structure, significance of the whole, non-handmade witness of God, colour partitions, underpainting, move from the dark, system of white patches, highlights, rhythm and witness through light.” Shvartsman’s aspiration towards light-bearing images as an image of the new – coming, yet already transformed – world also relates to these same witnesses of the icon. Hence the concept of metamorphosis, central to his entire creative method and presented by synonyms in Christian tradition – transformation = metamorphosis (GREEK).

The most important thing, however, was that the icon predefined the concept of hieratic art and the lexicon expressing this concept. Above all, of course, the concept of the sign. Here, Shvartsman actualises all the meanings of Old Russian root-words, assimilated by icon-painting. Let us recall the main set of dictionary meanings. Sign (znak) – pattern, witness, trace, specimen serving as evidence or confirmation of something – is a word etymologically dating to the Slavonic word znat (discern, notice, see) meaning to know, be able to do something, be trained to something, discern, recognise, know, instruct, have a command of; the adverb from the verb (znatno) implies distinctly, clearly, noticeable, visibly, evidently, with knowledge and justly. Someone who knows (znatok) is a connoisseur or witness, while an emblem (znamya) implies a drawing, witness, proof, specimen (something confirming a description of something). A holy sign (znamenie) is an image, unusual phenomenon or wonder. A master draughtsman (icon-painter) is a znamenschik, while znameniti means to make an image on something, draw or paint.⁸ To place a sign, signature or print is znamenovati.⁹ Znamenovatisya is to make the sign of the cross, pray, worship or vow. All Gnosological aspects can also be related here – knowledge, recognition, identification, meaning, significance and designation in Russian.

The icon does not know anything accidental or arbitrary. It is a manifestation of a higher reality and the living traces of its revelations in the thick of tradition. And although hieratic art does not know the austere canons of icon-painting, it follows similar guidelines. That is why Shvartsman’s sign-image (image – GREEK, icon) is identified with a self-witness. It is both a “higher form of silent communication” or ascetic isichia (“the sign is good silence”, the “silent name is Hierasign”) and as a good flow (“flow of signs”) of hieratic revelations requiring an answer and recognition. Neither should it be forgotten that the word “hieratism” also comes from the world of the icon.¹⁰

The icon also predefined the mysterial-liturgical, congregational meaning of the hieratic sign-images: “The hieratic signs are strictly hierarchic. The hieratic structure of the images is iconic.” In Orthodox Church tradition, the wall paintings, tier of the iconostasis and special places for the locally revered and festive icons reflect the hierarchic structure.

The term hierarchy entered Orthodoxy thanks to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, who developed a fusion of Neo-Platonism and Christianity.¹¹ Shvartsman regarded this term mainly in its mystical meaning. The reader of his texts familiar with Corpus areopagiticum cannot avoid sensing here the remarkable proximity with the endless worlds of innumerable celestial ranks – angels, archangels, seraphim, cherubim, powers, forces, minds, or the unknown ones hidden from man in the mysterious light. We recall the logic of Pseudo-Dionysius, without which it is difficult to understand Shvartsman’s hieratism: “All the

celestial ranks are manifesters (GREEK) or messengers of those higher than themselves” (Concerning the Celestial Hierarchy, X, 2) so that “the rays of the divine light are conveyed to the lower through the higher” (XIII, 3). As the “hierarchy is the sacred structure (GREEK, GREEK), knowledge and activities as close as possible to the divine beauty and, with the shinings imparted to them from on high, directed towards the possible deity-imitation” (III, 1), divine knowledge and divine beauty, as an element of all perfection, impart their light to each according to his merit, cleansing, enlightening and perfecting those who become their participants via the divine sacrament.

It goes without saying that none of the aforementioned parallels from the world and theology of icons is a literal source of Shvartsman’s “hieratures” and “countenances”. The Moscow hierat regarded this as a world of predecessors, a thousand-year world of a saintly, but old canon. He, however, bore witness of the new – a new language and new revelations.

Turn-of-the-Century Religious-Philosophical Modernism?

The great heritage of the Russian utopian thinking of Vladimir Solovyov, Vyacheslav Ivanov, Nikolai Berdyaev and Father Pavel Florensky was a belief in the theurgic mission of the future synthetic art, the new religious consciousness, new revelations, the Third Testament of the Holy Spirit, the proximity of a new eon, a new language and new words capable of expressing the revelations of the eschatological innovation. This religious-philosophical modernism of the turn of the century was the second source of hieratic art.

Mikhail Shvartsman was familiar with the theosophical quests of the Symbolists and was himself interested in anthroposophy (with special significance – Rudolf Steiner’s doctrine of the three stages of esoteric ascent: imaginative cognition, inspiration and intuition). His lexicon was peppered with traces of former passions – inspiration, imagination, intuition, fore-phenomenal, metamorphosis, organic, hierarchies and initiation. He did not, however, become an anthroposophist. Succession with spiritual quests of Russian modernism did not pass with Shvartsman on the level of individual doctrines, but through the formation of his own discourse. The question of “direct influences” thus loses its meaning. The same lexicon, postulates and thoughts are encountered in the texts of writers whom Shvartsman probably did not read.¹² He himself was ironically critical of the esoteric artist Nicholas Roerich, although the textual coincidences with him are indeed remarkable.¹³

Or another example – parallels with the aesthetics of the Symbolist poet Vyacheslav Ivanov, for whom the “theurgic principle in art is the principles of the least forcefulness and the most perceptiveness. Not imposing one’s will on the surface of things is the highest testament of the artist, but to mature and announce the innermost will of essences ... Only this openness of the spirit will make the artist a bearer of the divine revelation ... Vladimir Solovyov places the theurgic task as the highest task of art. By the theurgic task of the artist he implies the manifestation of the super-natural reality transforming the world and the liberation of true beauty from under the rough covers of the essence. In this sense, Solovyov spoke about Dostoyevsky – artists and poets again should become high priests and prophets, only in a different sense, more important and sublime.”¹⁴ Once again we see lexical parallels – mystery, hierarchy, hierophant-artists, discernment of higher realities, ascent to the highest existence, sacrifice, countenance and

the crystals emanating the blue. The question is not about whether these particular texts were read by Shvartsman, but the discursive mechanisms of their birth. Birth in completely different cultural conditions and in a completely different artistic situation and time.

Existentialism can also be related to the line of the religious-philosophical modernism. In the early 1960s, existentialism was extremely popular in Moscow, thanks to the reappraisal between Western thought and the traditions of Russian religious philosophy, above all in the heritages of Nikolai Berdyaev and Lev Shestov. Shvartsman fully accepted the “existential principle of responsibility.” Art, for him, was the “language of the signs of the transcendental basis of existence.” Shvartsman’s notebooks contain many excerpts from the writings of Berdyaev and Shestov. He also refers to Karl Jaspers, whom he only knew from second-hand works on Western philosophy. Although Jaspers’ three-volume Philosophy has still not been translated into Russian, there is a close resemblance between the basic intuitions of the German philosopher and the Moscow hierat. Here are just a few selected examples: “Besides rational language, art speaks in its own tongue, which informs the first-reason truth of existence.”¹⁵ Art “is the intermediary field between mysticism and existence.”¹⁶ “Art is a function of existence. It is a factor of an undoubted insight into the world of human openness” (I, p. 340). “Man penetrates art in metaphysical thinking” (III, p. 193). “As a philosophy of art, metaphysics is thinking in art and not about art” (III, p. 192). “Mysticism exists where the cipher is the beginning, where it is necessary to destroy this cipher and merging with the transcendental from which the cipher has broken away” (III, p. 192). “The concreteness of existence is bound in plastics. God is present in a superhuman image in the ciphers of the plastics” (III, p. 198). “There is no longer any truth where anything alien is considered sufficient” (I, p. 332).

What do all these parallels, analogues and coincidences mean? They clearly do not only mean the individual line of fate of Mikhail Shvartsman. The individual in some way grasped onto and reproduced the common, what is generally known in the language of profound psychology as the “archetypal”. This close interest in theosophical, hermetic, religious-philosophical and metaphysical tendencies cannot be regarded as something accidental. In the early twentieth century, they signified the breakthrough towards a new understanding of reality. The appearance of non-objective art was also linked to the intense reflections on the possibilities of expanding the experience of reality and the means of its interpretation.¹⁷ Wassily Kandinsky, Kazimir Malevich and Mikhail Matiushin were all interested in theosophy. At the start of his career, Piet Mondrian was jealously devoted to anthroposophy. Post-war abstract art would have been unthinkable in Russia without the experience and issues raised by existentialism.

Russian Avant-Garde?

Back in his student years, Mikhail Shvartsman went through a period of interest in “the French art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and studied Cézanne, Matisse, Derain, Picasso and the Fauvists.” Thanks to the unique collection of George Costakis, he was able to see the original masterpieces of the Russian avant-garde. He was also familiar with classical Western avant-garde from books.

What did all this knowledge, studying and interest mean? The external lines of coincidence are clear. Shvartsman has much in common with the avant-garde, above all the imperative of the new – a new consciousness, a new man and, corresponding to this innovation, a new artistic tongue to which the future belongs (“the language of the

third millennium”). It was the power of this imperative that condemned the artist to the tragic position between the old and the new. This explains his roles of prophet (“sphere of prophecies, which will be read with the cosmic consciousness of the future”) and denounced. He censured all that was old, obsolete and hampering the movement of the new by passing innovations, fashion or commercialism. Hence his Messianic pathos. The artist was not simply painting a picture; he was saving art and, at the same time, saving man and his world and cosmos. Hence, ultimately, the paradoxical dialectics of democratism (art saving all) and romantic elitism (the selected save art) thrusting into the foreground a genius. A genius that embraces a whole series of qualities – charisma, transcendental self-discovery, unity of talent and existence dating back to the very foundations of existence, and unique demiurgic element recreating the world.

The school of hieratic art also dates back to the traditions of the Russian avant-garde. This was less a study group and more of a creative environment, formed by the force field of the artist’s personality and the relationship between the students and the master, leader and teacher of life. There were several similar schools in Russia, linking the new art to a spiritual, philosophical unity – the schools of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin, Kazimir Malevich, Mikhail Matiushin, Pavel Filonov, Vladimir Favorsky and Vladimir Sterligov.

Notwithstanding all the similarities, however, there are important differences. The inevitable elitism of the charismatic artist, set by tradition and actualised by the avant-garde, was well understood by Shvartsman, who subsequently implemented his own theory of aristocracy and hierarchy (“charismatic hierarchism”). And not only through discussions, evaluations, a circle of students and followers or a refusal to exhibit, but above all through his own concept of hieratic art. The essence of this programme lies in the radical surmounting or overcoming of the avant-garde, explaining Shvartsman’s sharp declaration: “Avant-garde” is a lie. This is vanity and the desire for advantages. With this shriek, ineptitude forces itself into rank. Not the “avant-garde”, but the organic sprouting of living branches on the tree of Eternal Life – that is the meaning of creativity.”

There were, of course, similar calls to return to the “organic” – an organic philosophy, an organic culture, an organic era – during the heyday of the classical avant-garde.¹⁸ With Shvartsman, however, the break with the avant-garde heritage took place with great consistency. There was no attempt to rediscover naïve (children’s, folk or archaic) art and no apotheosis of deformation, no rejection of culture, libraries, museums and the past in general. Rather, the witness of the latter provided a general basis. Neither did this break imply conservative retrospection. On the contrary, it demonstrated a clear aspiration towards a new retaining the “eternal links of life.”

This explains the sentence commuted to the old testament of the historical avant-garde and the Messianic preaching of the new: “Malevich thought and said that it was necessary to break. He hoped to build the new on a cleared place. This will not be the “new”, however, for it will be built on death, and the link of life will disappear. Even if one single link of life disappears, life will collapse. So the eternal links of life – ecology – were and are destroyed.

I, Mikhail Matveyev Shvartsman, think, say and invoke:

Do not kill, pull down or smash, but metamorphosise. This is the behest of life.

And now, the still engagable is an obsolete behest, a clumsipot covered in the prestige of the avant-garde – “break!” It is necessary, abhorring to cast it off.

Here is the new behest of the avant-garde: do not break – metamorphosise.

The fratricidal consciousness of the old avant-garde has proven, to itself and everybody else, that destruction is the ditch of the nether

The Ascent to the Fore-Sources

Attempting to sum up the initial results, it is clear that by addressing the sources of the hieratic universe, Shvartsman completely neutralised any attempts to reduce his art and thinking to icon-painting, anthroposophy, existentialism or Suprematist utopianism – notwithstanding the close resemblances to a whole series of discursive practices revealed by the question of sources. It is not difficult to guess the status of these resemblances, as it cannot be explained away by eclectic borrowing. The only possible explanation is inversion – replacements, turns and resettlings determined by the powerful force field of his own powerful logic – *paradoxical* in relation to the prevailing aesthetic conventions. The phenomenon of unlikeness does not, however, imply constructions which only belong to the existing order by the pure fact of their rejection of this order. What we have here is a personal order, personal rules and personal figures of through requiring acts of inversion.

What, then, is the reason for this need for the logic of the paradox? This question leads us on to the following step into the mire of the source. The first signpost, breaking the “Ariadne’s thread” of Russian utopianism, is the creative genius of the prophet of the future – Velimir Khlebnikov and his movement to the roots and fore-sources of poetic language. Shvartsman’s position is equally radical, in the literal sense of the word (*radix* is Latin for root or foundation). Shvartsman addresses the profound roots of what is generally known as art. He addresses them in order to overcome their historical shrivelling – artificiality and such tricks as illusions, engineering inventiveness, cunning devices, stylisation, emblematics and “attributiveness”.

Shvartsman himself spoke very little about this: “With the hieratic I unwind the thread of the ancient memory immured in the flesh.” It is possible, however, to reconstruct the movement of his thoughts towards the fore-historical sources and profound layers of roots (once again marked by the archaicising symbolism of the prefix *fore* – fore-phenomenal, fore-memory and fore-consciousness). Not, naturally, through the obsolete construction of the single tree of art (from the neolithic age to our days), but by reflecting on its living branches, changing along with the functions of art and the role of the artist. In this unretreating address of the creative demiurgic force, in an endless game of possibilities, Shvartsman attempts to join something that split up at the very dawn of civilisation – the self-lawful phenomenon and sacral nature of art. From this stance, he refers the modern artist back to the archaic bifurcation only recalled today by etymology, the archaeology of language.

This appeal to the language memory may well be the shortest means of elucidating the essence of Shvartsman’s claims and the nature of his discourse as an all-embracing, organising and differentiating principle.

For comparative language knowledge, the concepts of art, artisticism and artisticness, used to designate various manifestations of modern art, do more than just refer back to the fundamental achievements of Greco-Roman culture. They also indicate the more profound strata of the Indo-European heritage, which lead us to the first meaning of *art*.¹⁹ This meaning is retained in the Europeanised Russian term of *ritual* (**rta*). The paths of practices thus diverge from the profound root unity of words designating ritual-religious, magic, priestly actions and, simultaneously, the actions of an experienced and skilled master or craftsman. The ancient languages recorded the essence of their demarcations. The languages of ancient culture actualised the general aesthetic or the measuring-technical, logical potentials, whereas the Indo-European fund actualised the possibilities of the universal nature of the profound sacral concept.

Here are several examples. The Latin *ars*, the basis of the modern word *art*, refers back to *artis* – craft, activity, mastery, ability, science, system of rules, theory, art, skill, artificiality, work of art, cunning and artfulness. Hence *artificium* – art, mastery, craft, technique, free fine arts, system of rules, theory, teaching, work of art, skilful work, experience, ability, high mastery,²⁰ device, means and pretence. Hence, finally, *artifex* – artist, creator, master, specialist and connoisseur.

The affair of the artist is not merely confined to skilful cunning or professional craftsmanship; beneath it lies a deeper stratum. This is indicated by the words *articulo* (divide, articulate, separate, enunciate) and *articulus* (composition, vessel, body part, ganglion, projection, part, division of speech, part of sentence, joined speech divided into large and small sections, suitable moment, decisive moment, turning point, circumstance, chance, position, step, auxiliary hierarchy, article and paragraph).

It is easy to note that all these simultaneously separating and joining, hierarchically significant and spontaneous actions, marked by a decisive, fate-forming and self-lawful aspect, are directly linked to a ritual (*ritus* – rite or ritual). This is understandable. The intention of a ritual is to link space and time in correspondence with the higher law of their special division and correct combination – demarcation (hence the quest for terms – *terminus* or border) and new unity. That is how mysterial actions, words, formulae, texts and the time of their pronunciation, correlated to the symbolic time of ritual first meanings, separate and join up. It should not be forgotten that the Indo-European **rta* relates to the sphere of sacral vocabulary and is characterised by meanings indicating measurement – time, definite (fixed, established or

appointed) time, right time or time for sacrifice (compare with the temporal meanings in *articulus* – suitable moment, decisive moment, turning point).

In turn, the sacrifice itself is divided and separated, in order to be reestablished in a new unity (metamorphically realised, transformed and transfigured). Tautology is inevitable here. Reestablishment is a manifestation of the new, while *sacrificere* is both a gift and an offering – something that is brought, created, raised up and done. The priestly ritual action on the offering is separation, division, articulation and divergence of the heterogeneous, gathering, joining in one, putting together, i.e. something implying co-relation, arrangement, harmony, tact and syntax (GREEK). That is why the rite of sacrifice (GREEK) is always a mystery of the taming of chaos – a drama and a celebration (thanksgiving, glorification) all at the same time.

The hieratic vocabulary of Shvartsman’s discursive-artistic practices reproduced all these meanings. The word *hierat*, which Shvartsman called himself, directly dates from the Ancient Greek *hieros* (GREEK), meaning priestly, sacred or divine, i.e. simultaneously sacred to the gods (forbidden, sacrosanct, cult, devoted to the divinity) and executed by the gods (divine inspiration, divine grace, divine will).²¹ Another word belonging to Shvartsman also comes from *hieros* – *hierature*. The *hieratures* were sign-images – visible incarnations of the sacred revelations and liturgical acts of the artist/hierat. What Shvartsman depicted on his specially primed boards was not fantasy, fiction or invention, but the enforced authenticity of a concrete experience. As he himself insists, this is not only an individual experience, but a collective experience rooted in the congregational knowledge, in the fore-memory and the great creations of the masters of the past. Shvartsman’s mysterial *testimony* of this

III. THE HIERAGRAPHIC HERITAGE

Mikhail Shvartsman avoided calling himself an “artist” and calling his works “pictures” or “paintings”. This deliberate distance was upheld by his own vocabulary, which subordinated everything “artistic” to the hieratic.

One of the key words here is *hieragraphy* (the artist’s own term). Lexically, it was preceded by the similar word *isograph*, which Shvartsman rejected, fearing that his work would then be identified with icon-painting.²² The meaning and function of both terms nevertheless remained identical. Their intention was to confirm that “there is an enormous difference (you can understand) here between the artistic activities of an artist and spirit-testimony by fate.” One was an artist; the other was an isographer, hierographer or hierat (a master whose oeuvre was hieragraphy, its school and concepts): “Only the summoned can engage in isography, as the wilful desire to be in line is impossible here, just as stigmata are impossible by choice. Isography is fate.”

Shvartsman also spoke about being called in relation to his own term of hieragraphy: “A summons to spiritual work, the basis of which is testimony of the Holy Spirit.”

Shvartsman insisted that this calling was fate formative, both for the

icon-painter/isographer and the artist/hierat. The fate of the hierat, however, was special. For Shvartsman, this implied overcoming the two main temptations of modernity – stylistic following of ready-made canons and avant-garde perception by the romantic figure of the genius, who sees and cognises not what nature has created, but what nature has not created and to which it should aspire. Hieragraphy implied something different – a mysterial-liturgical testimony of new, continuing discoveries in the paradoxical self-discoveries of hieratic hierarchies. For Mikhail Shvartsman, who converted to Orthodoxy in 1970, this meant the reestablishment of the lost “Adam privileges” and, first and foremost, the joy of confirming the world as a gift and grace in the creative experience of “hieratic spirit-extraction”. The most important thing was to discern in everything, whether it was creativity, a work of art, work with students or the endless relationship of hierarchic co-subordinates.

The hierarchy is the ontological foundation of hieragraphy. Shvartsman regarded everything as hierarchic, above all the deed of the artist/hierat, dating back to self-testimonies of the hieratic sign via an overcoming of the objective-anthropomorphic element. Thematically, this hierarchic ascent is represented by the “countenances”, the

Countenances

The Countenances were a large cycle of Shvartsman’s works mostly dating from the 1960s. This was a fundamental stage of hieratic art, opening up the first hieratic hierarchy – the Countenance as the Sign of the Spirit.

Formally, Shvartsman’s “countenances” are anthropomorphic. They are not, however, portraits, heads or icons. The human is only present in them in the form of extreme defamiliarisation, rather like when we see a person in a coffin. We do not see him in the fullness of the possibilities of life, but completely cut off from all that is transient, passing and sensual. Death reveals to us the iconic, emblematic concentration of the personality or its countenance. A thickened and frozen trace of life – an enigmatic emblem alive. Not an emblem of the past, but an emblem of the new. The countenance is birth into a new life, the beginning of a new life.

This “iconic trace of oneself in the coffin” – “icon of a passed life, its iconic, emblematic concentration”, “spiritual birth in death, which creates a countenance of oneself, an icon of oneself” – is the main theme of Shvartsman’s early hieratures. In them, he aspires to achieve a high spiritual concentration capable of moving away from the portrait to the “meta-portrait”, from the phenomenal to the “proto-phenomenal” and to the “sign of the reason for the face”.

Several of the Countenances were given the name of “herald” – Herald (1963), Good Herald (1964), Herald in a High Hat (1965), Blue Herald (1968) and Herald of Morning (1972). This word contains many meanings, including an envoy, ambassador and angel (GREEK). That is why Shvartsman’s Countenances are not archaic “heads” or ritual “masks” and not even “icons” in the traditional sense of the word. They are emblems of forces which still do not have names – enigmatic hierarchies of another life, entrance to which is always spiritual birth of the new via the inevitable death of the previous and the preceding. This explains their eschatological androgynous nature and the special, *en face*, inwardly regulated space, magnetically attracting the viewer. Hence, from the paradox of the mutual interpretation of the symbols and metaphors of life by way of the symbols and metaphors of death to the exclusive attention towards metamorphoses. If the sign is not previously invented (this is impossible in hieratics), but born as a result of transformations and modifications, death is birth in a death image, testifying to a passing through the fatal frontier for the sake of resurrection in an hieratic image.

Hieratures

The Hieratures were the following cycle of works on which Mikhail Shvartsman worked after the Countenances. Although there is nothing anthropomorphic about this group of works, the artist did not attempt to contrast them to the “countenances”. There is a very good reason for this is, as they are very much the same thing. The countenance was an hieratic structure, while the hieratures were the Sign of the Spirit. This explains why, visually, they have much in common – the facade-like nature; the contoured or contrasting organisation of the general masses, which are detached from the background; the calligraphy of the exact lines, the rhythmic repetitions in the proportions of individual parts and the symmetrical colour or structurally like motifs. Looking at these pictures with a detached eye or capable mind, all this unwittingly turns the colour-tone masses detached from the background into a form of “figure” conjuring up

associations with the axial system of crystals.

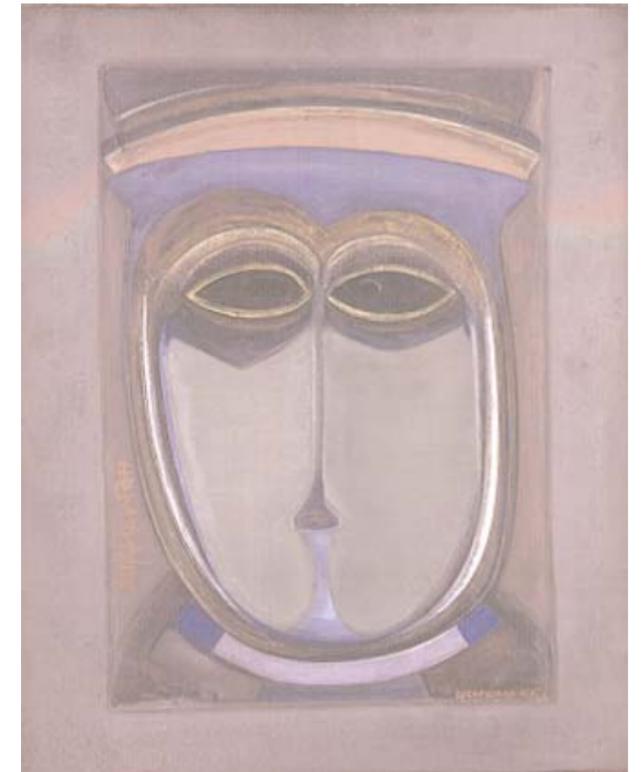
The hieratures are non-objective painterly structures based on an hierarchical “correlation of degrees of complexity and order”. Shvartsman himself negatively characterised them as “not architecture”, while insisting on their architectonic nature: “The term Hierature in the hieratic concept implies an architectonic, hierarchic Sign of the Spirit.” The artist was convinced that a “new figurative structure of modern architecture has now been found in hieratics. To be more precise: an architectural style signifying the end of the heartless preoccupation with everything technical and standing on an equal par with the grand styles of grand architecture. The principles of the birth of the forms of this new architectural style are designated prophetically by the acts of the hieratures.”

All the hieratures do indeed have architectonic features. They are built up, constructed and exactly regulated in the correlations of their elements and the diverse means of their division, co-subordination, unification and interrelations. They open up as the eye passed over them – on the outside, on the inside and from unexpected angles. One can also, to a certain extent, speak about the architecture of the painterly grounds, about the linear carcasses and the textural masonry of the surfaces. The parallels with architecture, however, end here. Architecture demands exact blueprints and calculations and is controlled by numbers and addition and subtraction. The number is always equal to itself and a self-identity. The hieratures are different. They are dominated by the pure natural element of the painterly-plastic substance – something like the maternal crystal liquid giving the fore-form to the crystal. The initial plan is open to prophetic acts. The “blueprint” is completely dissolved in the free, volcanic-spontaneous and tectonic process of the birth of the sign.

Seeking parallels to the hieratures in architecture, they are to be found, above all, in Byzantine architecture and, to a greater extent, Old Russian icon-painting, where the use of architectural motifs extends beyond the bounds of rational categories, linear logic and the laws of earthly existence. As has been noted by a leading Russian expert on theology and icons, architecture is “interpreted with a dose of painterly ‘foolishness in God,’ in complete contradiction to rational categories. This fantastic architecture constantly confounds the reason, putting it in place and underlining the over-logics of faith.”²³ The faith mentioned here is one for which the biblical metaphor from the Book of Proverbs – “Through wisdom is an house builded” – is not an allergy, but the everyday experience of overcoming homelessness.

Hieratures are not icons. Shvartsman sharply rejected all forms of perspective – reverse perspective, icon-painting perspective and direct Renaissance perspective. The only thing remaining from the Renaissance is the relationship with painting – a passionate demand for mastery and a painterly surface. Shvartsman was uncompromising about this and, like the Renaissance masters, returned to several of his works many years later, repainting them. Like the great artists of the past, he achieved the effect of colourfulness using very few tones, employing not only the brush, but also his fingers and hands.²⁴ In everything else, the endlessly complex, counterpoint-like organised and the unfolding spaces of the hieratures, simultaneously attracting and attacking, refer back to an altogether different concept of painterly tasks, ones immediately addressing linear clarity and a polyphony of colour transformations. The artist believed that this response overcame the “false Renaissance contradiction between line and colour.” The time of the work also became musically polyphonic. Shvartsman was convinced that, pressed in a single hieratic resolution, the vision “imbibed all grounds,” allowing perception to be present on all levels. An act impossible without activating the imagination, memory and feeling of a single whole.

Another feature of the hieratures is their aspiration to overcome the



Herald (Humility). 1964–72
Cat. 57

force of gravity. Hieratures are a form of soaring structure. When examining individual works, Shvartsman permitted and sometimes even encouraged them to be turned around on their sides. With the exception of the decorative-ornamental tradition, the only parallel in art is plafond painting. Outside painting, this is the rituals of symbolical inversion, according to which each true analogy can be employed in the reverse order, like a palindrome.

The Correlation of Graphic Art and Painting

Mikhail Shvartsman’s order of work on the hieratures was an invariable part of his “hieratic teaching”. The first stage consisted of the graphic development of the theme, followed by the work of his students on adaptation of the graphic theme offered by the master on canvas. The master himself then worked on the preliminary preparations, until the “dough” was formed. The final stage of work was “recognition”.

Each stage was accompanied by its own transformations, metamorphoses, sacrifices and discoveries. The starting point was the graphic experience of the sign – work and reflections on the sign, graphic discoveries and the unfolding of the idea-theme (first requests, first prophecies and guarantees of sign-birth). Shvartsman called graphic works with such forms of ideas Inventions (in music, the *inventio* is a small instrumental piece of a polyphonic nature). The



Anno. 1974
Cat. 500

Inventions were not studies, however, but “born signs” or “tabernacles”. Each born sign was an emblem – a silent name and higher form of silent intercourse. Shvartsman worked on the Inventions at home, often long into the night, in concentration and solitude.

The following life of the invention presupposed its adaptation – the “adoption” of the idea-theme by the canvas. The initial stage here was the assimilation and development of the theme by the apprentice-students. On the one hand, through the “dough”, the painted preparation of the surface of the canvas; on the other, through “superimposition” (transferring part of the invention onto canvas). In teaching, Shvartsman expected the student to be ready to “crystallise the ability to detect the essences given from on high.”

The preparation of the dough by the student was the pre-hieratic stage of accumulation – the creation of pre-hieratic structures of defamiliarisation and, consequently, situations for acts of defamiliarisation leading to the “exit to the hierato”. It was here that the artist-demiurge began his direct invasion of the picture and his work on the matter presented to him. The master did not so much correct the mistakes of the student as demonstrate alternative approaches. This could concern anything – the general contours, the colour, the tones or individual sections. The original matter of the painterly defamiliarisation thus passed into the power of the metamorphoses. Something must die or be given in sacrifice to provide a place for something else. Something must be transformed, subordinated to the will of new births. Something must come to the foreground, in order to later perhaps turn to the flickering trace of the past shining through new strata. Requiring great concentration and spontaneity, such work could continue for hours, days, months and even years. As we have already noted, Shvartsman returned to several works many years later, altering them with microsurgical precision.

The final stage was the most responsible one. Outside observers think that virtually every abstract artist can say, at any moment of the creative act, that the work is finished, completed and the desired result achieved. The result can be any stage of the work. This is not the case for Shvartsman. The crowning moment of everything was the recognition. If the preceding processes, in the artist’s own words, were the stages of the anguished “liberation of the image” – “The preceding processes, the stages of the sacrificial metamorphosis, are brutal, inevitable and peremptory, like the changing of the generations” – recognition implied a joyous, delighted, festive discovery of the “sign promise” – “an instant – it instantaneously hit me – the prayer for Transfiguration gave fruit – the sign of the Spirit is revealed.” This form of discovery was, for Shvartsman, the self-discovery of the sign. The aim (thelos) of sign lay in the sign itself.

In the meaning given to it by Shvartsman, the sign not only had Christian Gnostic meaning. It was also stoically identified with an axiom. The sign was axiomatic and unchallenged. It did not require any proof, even if it did come out of the unforeseen. Shvartsman was convinced that the unforeseen was the “following of the higher.” What also remained unforeseen, however, was the viewer’s perception.

Archetypal Motifs

Mikhail Shvartsman consistently avoided any hints of mimetic, illusionist representationalism, objectivity or the anthropomorphic nature of his “sign-images”. The visual perception confirmed the “typology” of the hieratic statements. Both the thoughts and the memory stubbornly protected the archetypal motifs – the general outline and

the stable, dominant configurations and structures embracing the picture plane and, to one extent or another, repeating themselves from one work to another.

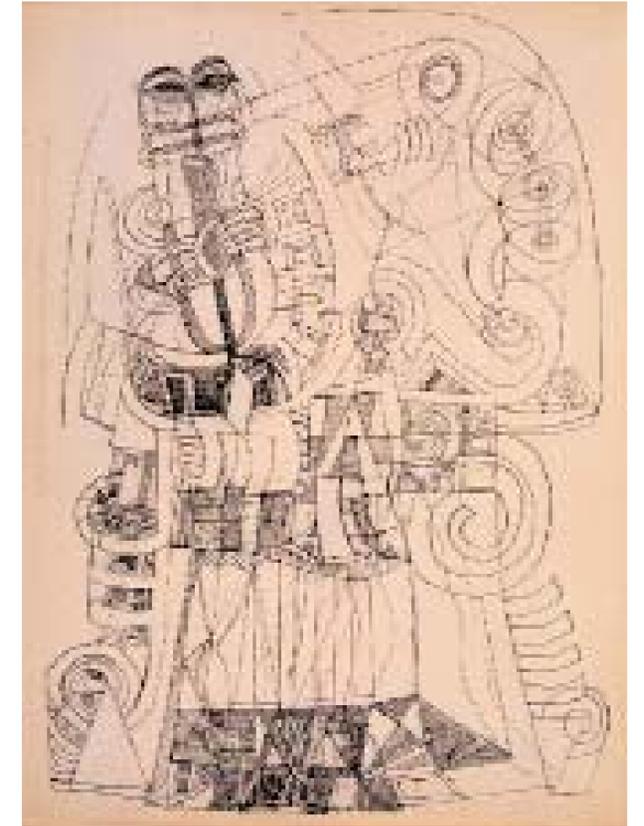
An objective description of these motifs is impossible, as we are dealing here not with objects, but signs and images. The classifying parallels and systematising analogies nevertheless remain in the zone of the visual encounter with the hieratures. Shvartsman’s hieratures, signs and images are, of course, *per se* not decipherable. Yet as data of the visual experience, they are attractive for the analyst, phenomenologist and the follower of profound psychology. Herein lies yet another paradox of Shvartsman’s hieratic universe; a paradox, as we know, provided by the artist himself.

If the hieratic experience cannot be something ready-made, passable from one to another without risk of personal involvement, the “sign contradiction”, “replacement of the sign metamorphoses” and “recognition” are the fate of both the viewer and the master. Visual contemplation and delight give birth to one’s own contents, ones in which the borders of the artist’s systematic context can be shifted or completely erased. The instability of the set aesthetic borders can be predefined not so much by the game of free associations, as by the visual construction, for example by the dominance of the vertical – the axis of symmetry, the upwards movement, contrast or something similar. We are dealing here with a form of visual universalium, inevitable wherever there is surface, straight angles, format, diagonals, centre, up-down and left-right. And while such universalia exist, the principle of any construction based on symmetry will be justified for a whole series of other systems – a shutter, the wings of a butterfly and the structure of a crystal. Even though Shvartsman did not depict anything similar, he still thought in terms of abstract signs. Any plastic construction, however, has its own mental equivalents, expressing meanings or the characteristics and properties of some structures. It is no accident that the structure of unknown molecules was predicted on the basis of the properties of symmetry.

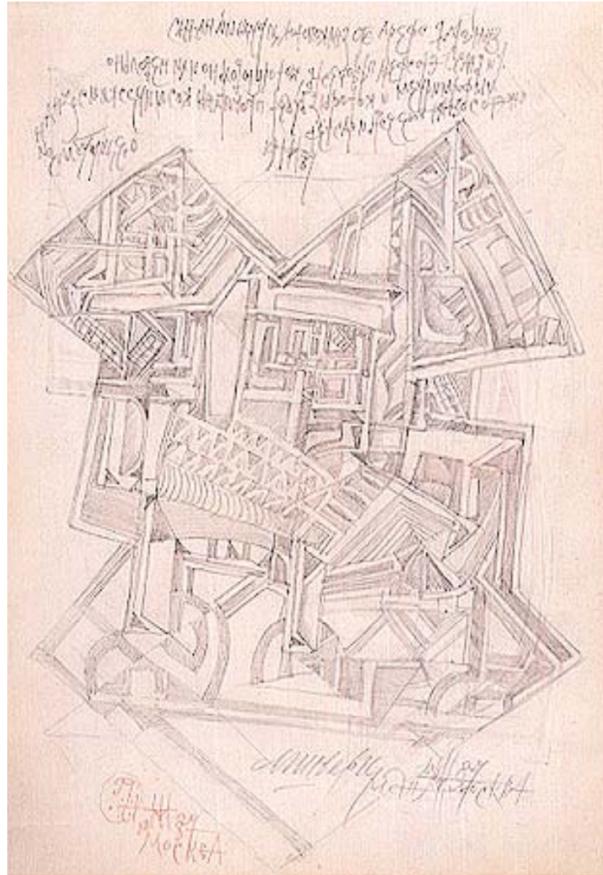
The hieratures are indivisible from the onslaught of mental analogies. Otherwise, what was the reason for giving them albeit arbitrary names? Shvartsman’s sign-image painting never implied the stage of radical phenomenological reduction of the transcendental epoch. Correspondingly, there was no interest in “white on white” or the asceticism of minimal art. The artist himself said that the hieratures inveigh the nature of man, trees and flowers, only in a sublime sign. There is no doubt about that. They also accumulate meanings (albeit arbitrary) in a similar vein. According to Shvartsman the “sign-image” was the “logo-essence, thought-essence.”

The most capacious bearers of mental meanings are general structures included in a configuration, outline or “silhouette” separate from the background. Often divided from the background by the tonal-colour contrasts or the “razor clarity” of the elastic contours, this “external form” is represented in the hieratures by the four main types, inside which arise sometimes extremely unexpected modifications, mutual supplements and transformation transitions to other constructions and structures.

The first type of configuration follows the plastic dominant of the anthropomorphic figurativeness of the heralds. With the complete disappearance of any hint at figurativeness, what remains from them is a semi-circle and the vertical axe of the entire composition displaced at an angle with various degrees of deviation in *HOROSCOPE* (1972), *SECRET MEANING* (1972) and *OVERTHROW* (1973), the central places in which are now occupied by powerful diamonds or triangles in *KEEPER OF SILENCE* (1973) and *REINCARNATED HIERATURE* (1975). The silhouette masses soar in *FORMER INCARNATIONS* (1970) and *GROWTH* (1970) or duplicate themselves in *JACKDAW CRY AT DAYBREAK* (1975).



Pre-Hieratic Accumulation. No. 4. 1982
Cat. 601



Insights Cycle. No. 7. Consciousness. 1987
Cat. 697

The greatest tension is introduced by the energetic arrow-shaped and cross-shaped straight lines in *Ark* (1972–73), *First Hierature* (1972), *Seraph* (1972) and *Start of Wisdom* (1977). They charge the entire structure with the dynamism of self-discovering confluences and ascents – confluences of a “myriad of signs” and “sign links” and ascents to the borders and the touching of different worlds merged in a single instant. The path of discoveries and perfection (similar dynamics are presented in the icon-painting tradition in Theophanes the Greek’s *Transfiguration*).

While Shvartsman does not illustrate the Gospels, a trace of “previous incarnations” is nevertheless discernible. Beyond the bounds of the hieratures, if this does not contradict mythology, the ascent semantically unites the mountain and the palace. The mountain is the place of the divine epiphany – the scene of the Burning Bush or the *Transfiguration* or the symbolical “summits of the world” of the mystics. The mountain unites with the palace of the supreme God and the messianic revelation of the King of Glory on the throne (Mount Zion is described as the mountain of God in Psalm 48). In Hebrew tradition, the Messiah appears at the peak of a mountain. Mystics recall the stable images of the spiritual world of man, becoming the temple of the world – the banquet of Sophia Divine Wisdom, the city of the body, the corporeal temple (Orthodox tradition) or the body as the house of the soul (Kabbalah). There are also the gates – the gates of the soul, narrow gates or royal gates, opened wide in triumph.

The second type of configuration recalls a tree – an austere axis along the centre forms the correlations of masses, like a trunk and crown with horizontal divisions – *Primulus* (1974), *Lotos* (1977), *Formula of Dolphin* (1978) and *Shutters of Day* (1980). The constancy of this particular structure is understandable, as the tree is a bearer of organic transformations and metamorphoses. On the other hand, the tree refers us back to the concept of matter. The Ancient Greek word GREEK has the first meaning of forest, followed by chopped wood or lumber, then material. The Latin *materia* has the original meaning of the heart of wood, followed by wood as a building material, material in general and a foundation or matter in the philosophical sense. In the history of symbolism and mythology, the tree is an image of the world in its axial dimension. There is the world tree, the tree of life (the Jewish tradition compares the Torah to it), the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the philosophical tree and the Kabbalah tree of Sphiroth and, ultimately, the three of the cross and the cross itself (St John Damascene claimed that the true of life in Eden was an image for the cross). In Christian tradition, the tree is also an eschatological symbol – an image of the garden of paradise in heaven where, according to St Macarius the Great, all wood and leaves have changed and turned into another form of nature.²⁵ From the point of view of profound psychology, the tree represents an image of one’s self, as opposed to the unarranged chaos of formless multitude, symbolising the psychological wholeness of man. In psychological processes, the latter fulfil the function of an ordering concentration.²⁶

The third type of configuration can be nominally entitled the mandala. This Sanskrit word is usually used to designate the magic diagram employed in the practice of meditative contemplations. The mandala represents a geometric plane visible from above, containing the religious-philosophical concept of the universe – its sacred image, hierarchic staircase of spiritual forces, sacred fullness. Shvartsman did not, of course, depict any diagrams, mandalas or other guidebooks for lessons of oriental meditation. Taken in imaginary inverted commas, this word does, however, explain, in the shortest manner, the nature of the painterly structures organised by the embrace of epic rectangular contours and colour masses, particularly in *Source* (1971), *Crowning of Summer* (1976–86), *Memory of Paths* (1983),

Found Space (1983–85), *Irgarten* (1979–87) or *Habitat of Blues* (1982–87).

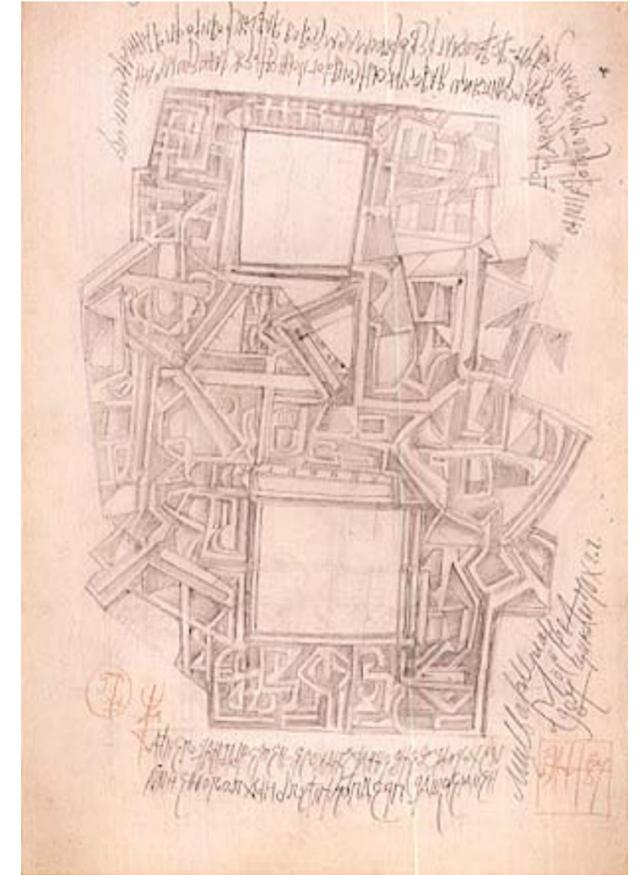
The correlations of the enclosing direct angles and contrasting free breakthroughs, gaps and rhythmic shifts turn each of the works into a captivating paradox of unity of dynamics and extreme static equilibrium, flatness and depth. Former leitmotifs merge again – albeit in a different relationship – in the oncoming step of the widening or departing universe of hieratic signs – breakthroughs, shavings, layers and labyrinth transitions. Hence, from the ritual of a previously concealed world now manifested in a sign, lies the ordeal of possible mental parallels – gates of heaven, habitats and houses (house of God, house of Israel, house of Jacob, through wisdom is an house builded), Jerusalem the heavenly city of the saints (eschatological image of a new world) and the classical symbolism of selfness (images of the middle and four-part wholeness).

The fourth type of configuration varies the motifs of the breakthrough. Although the works containing these configurations appeared in the early 1970s – *Hierature of Breakthrough* (1973–75) – the theme was developed in the 1980s in *Leviathan* (1978–87), *Winged Heart* (1977–89), *Triple Space* (1981–86) and *Rubicon* (1987–89). These works display an invasion of wide and light (seeming to shine) verticals, active asymmetry and traces of sacrificial rejections and tempestuous metamorphoses lit up by recognition. All this is dominated by the ritual of the transition – an unimpeded path inside and outside; a transition from one plane of existence to another; an invasion or breakthrough of another ontological level (a triumphalist sign of self-authentic selflessness to a still concealed reality). In the horizon of this openness lies “cardiographic sign will” – freedom of remarkable spontaneity, where the personal no longer demands central place or centric images, as in such works as *Locia* (1990). The triumph of unforeseen openness and the intensified polyphony of “sign links”. Everything is crowned by the royal revoking of the earthly laws of up and down and right and left – a visual parallel to one of the non-canonic speeches of Christ in the *Acts of St Peter*: “Unless ye make the things of the right hand as those of the left, and those of the left as those of the right, and those that are above as those below, and those that are behind as those that are before, ye shall not have knowledge of the kingdom.”²⁷

The diverse series of hieratures offered by typology do not end on this. Shvartsman’s sign-image world does not fit into any convenient scheme. After the first, inevitably simplified general classifications, the attentive viewer will undoubtedly discover far more complex interrelations. He will discern distinctive reliefs, registers of crossings, obstacles and layers inside the large forms and facets, steps and borders of other spaces, energetic fields and meanings in the middles of the crosses. He will hear the speech of the very outlines in a different way. That is the way it should be, for the hierature is not only a multi-level, it is also a multi-voiced missive.

The Mysticism of the Mercaba: Aleph and Hehalot

One of the hieratures on which Mikhail Shvartsman worked from 1978 to 1986 was entitled *The Aleph*. The impulse for its name was the story by Jorge Luis Borges. Borges’ *Aleph* is one of secret points of space in which all other points are gathered together. *Aleph* is indescribable on account of the inscrutability of the boundless. The literary hero only conveys his impressions: “In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or



Unbroken Ribbon. 1987
Cat. 707

transparency.”²⁸

Aleph is the name of the first letter in the alphabet of the Hebrew sacred language. In the Kabbalah, this letter is designated *En Sof* – the boundless pure divinity or the beginning designating the beginning of all beginnings. Borges was familiar with the mystic literature of the Kabbalah and skilfully threw a bridge to its contents. Shvartsman did not particularly study the Kabbalah, although he had a good knowledge of the Bible and esoteric Gnosis. His ascent to the fore-sources with “Ariadne’s thread” in his hands was possibly also an ascent to Jewish mysticism and the mysticism of the Mercaba.

The mysticism of the Mercaba is the mysticism of the throne of God,

incarnating all forms of creation; the mysticism of the cognition of the divine secrets of the innermost world of the heavenly mansions in the house of higher life. Its sources lie in theophany, a description of which begins the Book of Ezekiel in the Bible. In the interpretations of the later sages of the Kabbalah, however, attention is concentrated less on contemplation of God and more on a cognition of the secrets of the world of the divine throne.²⁹ The throne world of the Mercaba – the world of the glory of God – is the sphere of the divine light; a world filled with such an inexhaustible richness of meanings that no human speech is capable of embracing it.

The *hehalot* is the figurative sign of the hierarchic diversity of the world of the Mercaba. The heavenly “palaces” or “mansions” are the spheres of the light of the Mercaba, signifying definite signposts in the spiritual wanderings of the mysticism towards the throne of glory.

IV. MUNDUS INVERSUS

Since the days of antiquity, through medieval Europe, Baroque and Mannerism, right up to the present day, the topos of *mundus inversus* (inverse world) has remained one of the most important subjects of aesthetic reflections on the new. The concept of turning around can be understood in two ways. On the one hand, the new overturns the usual (our notions, expectations, order of values, criteria and appraisals). On the other hand, the new is always the new in relation to something already existing, thereby including this existing thing, only in a state of inversion, displacement and inversion.

The most effective and radical instruments of constructing an inverse world, alternative to the existing world, are the *adinaton* and *paradox*. The Greek word *adinaton* (GREEK – impossible) in this case implies a figure of creative activities which allows the creation of world existing according to different, unknown laws. In the ancient religions, the creation of the impossible was the sole prerogative of God. Jesus overturned this notion, however, linking the affairs of man with the affairs of God: “And they that heard it said, Who then can (GREEK) be saved? And he said, The things which are impossible (GREEK) with men are possible (GREEK) with God” (Luke 18: 26–27). Along with Christianity, the ontology of the impossible as the possibility of the impossible became part of religious art, particularly icon-painting. It then crossed over to Symbolism and its dreams of theurgy, before dissolving in the utopianism of the avant-garde. Shvartsman’s hieratics, as we have seen, decisively returned the artist to the original course of religious ontology. What is impossible (GREEK) for people is possible (GREEK) for God: “Beauty is subject to the Holy Spirit. Beauty is both the result and the channel of Spirit-manifestation.”

As the impossible implies breaking formed notions, general opinions, hearsay and expectations, i.e. everything that the Greeks called “dox” (GREEK), the impossible appears out of necessity as a paradox. A paradox (GREEK) is a statement contradicting the “dox”. As this contradiction disconcerted, the ancient writers identified the paradox with the unexpected, the unbelievable, the miraculous and the strange. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament, a paradox implies the miraculous, unexpected and the unusual. In the Book of Luke, at the end of the story of the healing of a paralysed man, we read: “And they were all amazed (GREEK), and they glorified God, and were filled with fear, saying, We have seen strange things (GREEK) to day” (Luke 5:26). Seen paradoxes evoke a state of ecstasy or amazement

among witnesses, making them praise God or filling them with fear.

At a later time, the paradox became not only an aesthetic category, but also an artistic strategy for revealing the hidden truth and the construction of the impossible, radical new. The new, inverse world was created via a sharp change of the points of view, through a denunciation of the “doxes” as transgressions, through the poetics of defamiliarisation, fantasy, invention and deformation and through aggressive rejection of the preceding. Both the utopian and the critical impulses of the avant-garde are thus realised.

Shvartsman consistently insisted on the paradoxical nature of his art. Overturning the power of the prevailing “dox” in Moscow culture of the 1960s–90s – the common features of the official art and the fashion for Western contemporary art – he still firmly adhered to religious ontology. He naturally did so in unity with aesthetic issues and a reinterpretation of the critical function of art. This is where a general analysis of his painting in the context of the hieratic discourse leads us. Whatever the case, all the themes and subjects of Shvartsman’s hieratic universe mentioned here should be regarded not dogmatically, but paradoxically, in correlation to his system.

Shvartsman was convinced that as the testimony of the Spirit was something completely new, the “appearance of painting has its own laws and essences, its own tasks and its own paradoxical metamorphosis.” This path is the path of mystery, new inspirations of form-creation and the sacral link of knowledge and mastery, which do not imply the modernist obligation to invent, “something that has necessarily never been, something never turned head over heels,” but a demanding trust in the processes of “organic transformation.” Everything here is paradoxical. This is, above all, a dictatorship of the reason: “Oh! Beauty is not subject to reason and even, oh paradox! does not conform to reason, for reason does not save.”

The world of Shvartsman’s hierarchies are also paradoxical and not dogmatic. They are far from static. Although each of them has its own ideal place, like the *sphiroth* of the Hebrew theosophists, they lead their own lives. They form combinations, illuminate one another and rise and fall. In a certain aspect, the low can therefore assume the form of the high.

The legend of Shvartsman, of course, remains a paradox. The paradox guards all attempts to interpret his creative heritage in any one definite way. All efforts to introduce “yes” or “no” inevitably lead to a neutralising “but”, to which all registers of the hieratic are subord-

inated. Yes, hieratures and not architecture, although a “concentrated idea of hieratic architecture, its image”. Yes, the principle of symmetry dominates, but is also repudiated by asymmetry. Yes, the painterly follows linearity, but the opposite is also true. Yes, hieratic art is subordinated to a system, but what sort of a system is it, if the system itself is subordinated to spontaneity?

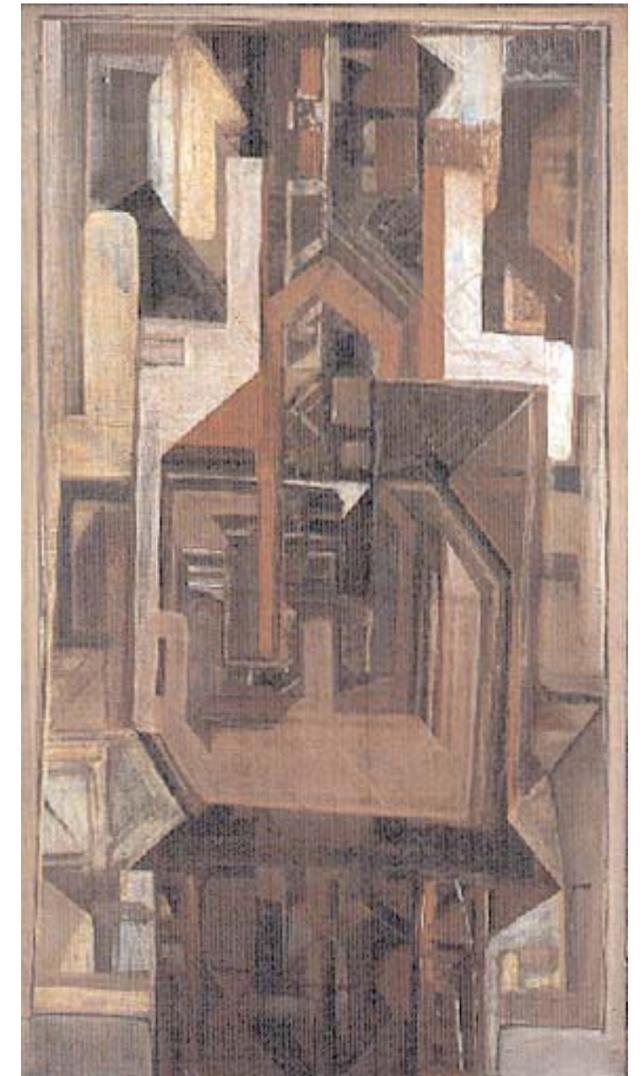
Ilya Kabakov attempted to reduce the paradox of Shvartsman’s hieratures to the straightforwardness of a trap: “Traps for the vision and the mind were placed everywhere, the entire ‘picture’ (or ‘who knows what’) was one enormous trap. Looking at the depicted ‘object’, the viewer discovered that the ‘space’, the protuberance into the following second of examination, was a cavity, a staircase leading nowhere, an arch opening an arch, a niche carved out of a niche, an entrance opening onto a new entrance, the protuberance became a fissure (the nose in the countenances was always a fissure), a new fissure always appeared in any fissure, the contours increased in number, doubled, tripled, quadrupled, yet it was impossible to define what surrounded this contour – space or an object. The artist carefully made sure that no firm sureness ever arose within the viewer. Everything was in flummox, changing places, pretending to be something and then the very next minute turning into the opposite. Everything was of an unstable, condensed, indefinite colour. Colour did not lie on the surface, but spoke out of the depths, as if hiding itself in the depths of the picture, below its surface, like a precious stone under a layer of dust.”³³

The trap, of course, was not the hierature, but the straightforwardness, with the paradox placing the interpreter in the role of a caricaturist. Shvartsman himself described the space of the hieratures through the labour of recognition. That is how we identify any self-lawful world of meanings, in the constancy of patient trust. And if we believe in the possibility of the impossible, we discover it as we pass through the “self-spreading” and “self-refuting space” of the hieratures, in which “everything ... is in an harmonic, even constructive whole, but everything is contradictory, everything slips away, everything is indefinite, everything metamorphosises.”

Shvartsman does not imply any answers preceding perception of the paradox. Outside the paradox, everything remains straightforward-equivocal and straightforward-contradictory. He himself warned of such traps of straightforwardness: “Space is directly perspective, space is calligraphic, spherical, reversibly perspective, it is counterposing in the hierature. The hieratic seems to want to objectify itself. This is one of the hieratic paradoxes (illusionised by an object). This is the paradoxical aspect of hieratics, i.e. the hieratic paradox – its essential attribute is perceived from without as a contradiction.”

No real paradox is confined to a battle with the commonly accepted or “dox”. It promises something unexpected, unbelievable, wonderful and strange, capable of amazing and delighting us – depending, of course, on our own willingness to heed the sacrament of metamorphoses. The kingdom of the new world comes accompanied with a readiness to accept its enigmatic logic. The ancients understood this. In the apocryphal Gospel of St Thomas (22), Jesus tells His disciples: “When you make the two one, and when you make the inside as the outside, and the outside as the inside, and the upper as the lower, and when you make the male and the female into a single one, so that the male is not male and the female not female, and when you make eyes in place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, an image in place of an image, then shall you enter the kingdom.”

Mikhail Shvartsman never regarded the tabernacles of the kingdom as an empty metaphor. They once overturned his world and,



Aleph. 1978–86

Cat. 150

with it, changed the scales of life, thought and creativity. Instead of changing styles, seasons, curators and fashions – the third millennium. Instead of pictures – hieratures. Instead of painting – hieratonics and liturgising in the Aleph-sphere. Instead of thinking up something “new” – the “Ariadne’s thread” of the memory immured in the flesh of cultures, leading through the sign contradiction, through the replacement of sign metamorphoses towards the impenetrable light of eternity. We have seen that everything is different in this inverse world. The past is not something that has gone, never to return, but is always present. An artistic discovery is not an original innovation, but the revelation of the ongoing world-creation. And the hierat is not an artist, but a

MIKHAIL SHVARTSMAN: ACROSS BORDERS

Mikhail Shvartsman is one of the nonconformist artists of the former Soviet Union least known outside his homeland. This should not, however, imply the absence of any interest in his oeuvre. In the late 1970s, French journalist Paul Thorez introduced first Paris and then the West to Mikhail Shvartsman, while Jean-Claude Marcadé was the first West European art historian to visit the artist in Moscow. Shvartsman was, at that time, just past the age of forty. A member of the first generation of nonconformist artists, he was a mature artist, well-known in Moscow and Leningrad, who had already formed his own style.

Mikhail Shvartsman’s willingness to exhibit decreased in direct opposite to the growth of interest in his art outside Russia or, rather, outside the former Soviet Union. The master’s life became increasingly like the existence of a hermit. The only exception was the decision to contribute several works to the *I Live I See* exhibition in 1988 – an important, albeit belated show in the West. Before this, despite invitations to contribute, the artist had refused to take part in a series of exhibitions – either because of obstacles placed in his path by the authorities or by his own unwillingness.

Blessed with a remarkable ability to spot unknown artistic tendencies and their most important representatives, Peter Ludwig was one of the first Western experts to take an interest in Mikhail Shvartsman. In 1980, however, the artist refused to contribute to one of the last exhibitions curated by Peter and Irene Ludwig. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Ludwigs collected post-Stalinist Russian art, putting together, by 1995, a collection of almost encyclopaedic scope. It is extremely indicative that although Mikhail Shvartsman was one of the earliest discoveries of Peter Ludwig, there is not a single work by the artist in the Ludwig collection. While one can only conjecture about the true reasons for this circumstance, it appears to be indirectly linked to the fact that Shvartsman never joined the official Union of Artists. The artist may have been frightened by the public resonance evoked by the exhibitions of Peter Ludwig.

In 1982, the Soviet authorities prohibited Mikhail Shvartsman from paying a reciprocal visit to the Italian poet and writer Antonio Guerra in 1982. Two years later, he was refused permission to exhibit works at the Düsseldorf Kunstverein. In 1987, the artist himself turned down Christie’s Auction House and David McKelvin, who invited him to contribute to *Unofficial Russian Art from the Soviet Union* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. Although Shvartsman was mentioned by a number of leading experts on modern Russian art – Matthew Cullerne Bown in *Contemporary Russian Art* (1989), Boris Groys in *Contemporary Art from Moscow* (1991) and Thomas Strauss in *Zwischen Ostkunst und Westkunst (von der Avantgarde zur Postmoderne)* (1995) – he was still not present at the most important Western exhibitions. This includes *Alternative attuali II* at the Castello Spagnolo in Aquila (1965), *Progressive Strömungen in Moskau 1957–1970* in Bochum (1974), *Zwanzig Jahre unabhängige Kunst aus der Sowjetunion* in Bochum (1979), *25 Years of Soviet Unofficial Art 1956–1981* at the Museum of Soviet Unofficial Art in Jersey City, New Jersey (1981), *Russian New Wave* at the Contemporary Russian Art Center of America in New York (1981–82), *Aspekte sowjetischer Kunst der Gegenwart* at the Neue Galerie Sammlung Ludwig in Aachen and Stadtmuseum in Cologne and *Sowjetkunst heute* at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne

(1988).

Mikhail Shvartsman received offers from numerous experts with international reputations and high-ranking representatives of important cultural institutions (see the chronology section). He so often turned them down that beyond the bounds of the “Russian circle”, his oeuvre remains undiscussed and more or less unpublished. Although two paintings found their way to an exhibition of nonconformist art from the Bar-Gera collection in 1996, this changed little. Shvartsman remains virtually unknown to all those unconnected to the Moscow underground – not even speaking about popular fame. With remarkable consistency, the hierat managed to successfully distance himself from art life.

The existing works of research, a detailed study of his writings and correspondence and the interpretation of his *Hieratures* lead to the inevitable question – what is the phenomenon of Mikhail Shvartsman? What does it mean if an artist, contrary to all expectations and normal behaviour, chooses to only exhibit his oeuvre in extremely limited doses, carefully selecting his target group – the public on which he himself was orientated?

Mikhail Shvartsman’s writings, to a certain extent, help to place his oeuvre in the history of art. From the phenomenological, art-historical point of view, there is nothing new to add to the profusion of information and interpretations, particularly as all analyses and researches were, without exception, made by people close to his own social environment – collectors, art historians, art critics and artists personally acquainted with Shvartsman who, as a result, enjoyed a direct insight into his oeuvre, which was closely linked to the structure of the artist’s personality.

Mikhail Shvartsman possessed the unique gift of being able to detach himself from the known, the definable and the rationally comprehensible. The term “artist” evoked in him a sense of revulsion; he regarded himself as an “hierat”. He considered the title of artist as inadequate, confined to such concepts as painting, sculpture and draughtsmanship. While Shvartsman was, of course, an artist who had an enormous influence on many other masters in Moscow and Leningrad, the aura surrounding him clearly exceeds the bounds of artistic creativity alone. In reality, therefore, he is something more than an artist; he is an hierat.

Shvartsman’s polymorphous self-interpretation is only revealed, particularly to those outside his narrow social circle or generation, through a conglomeration of his different ways of expressing his personality – the rich world of his pictures, self-reflective statements, letters, poems and notes. Any attempts to concentrate on only one of these facets – even the most vivid and potent one (his art) – fail to reveal the true essence of this great individualist. The borders set by one specific genre are always too narrow.

Shvartsman defined his own borders extremely stubbornly. The most distinctive frontier was the attempt to distance himself *expressis verbis* from his contemporary artists: “My attitude towards such artists was one of defence rather than love.” Although considered a metaphysical artist in the mould of Vladimir Yankilevsky or Eduard Steinberg, ranked among such members of the first generation of nonconformist artists as Dmitry Krasnoperstev and Vladimir Nemukhin and mentioned in the same breath as Vladimir Weisberg, Shvartsman always remained aloof from his aforementioned colleagues. Himself a writer (see the literary heritage section in this

¹ Mikhail Shvartsman, “Foreword”, *Mikhail Shvartsman. Zhivopis’*. Risunok, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 1994, p. 3. All following quotations from the artist’s manuscripts are based on the texts reproduced in this book, without reference to the page number.

² Ilya Kabakov, 60–e–70–e... *Zapiski o neofitsial’noi zhizni v Moskve*, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, Sonderband 47, Vienna, 1999, pp. 57, 60.

³ A. Borovsky, “Fenomen Mikhaila Shvartsmana: yazyk i real’nost’”, *Novyi mir iskusstva*, 2001, No. 5, p. 24.

⁴ Indrzych Halupecki, “Moskovskii dnevnik”, *Avangard: mesto v zhizni*, Moscow, 2000, p. 12.

⁵ An analysis of the discursive field in this case refers us back to Michel Foucault’s *L’Archéologie du savoir*. See in more detail about the links between an analysis of the discourse and literary analysis in J. Fohrmann, H. Müller (Hrsg.), *Diskurstheorien und Literaturwissenschaft*, Frankfurt-on-Main, 1988.

⁶ See M. Fasmer, *Etimologicheskii slovar’ russkogo yazyka*, Vol. II, Moscow, 1967, p. 101.

⁷ St Diadochos of Photiki, “Podvzhnicheskoe slovo, razdelennoe na sto glav. Glava 89”, *Dobrotolyubie*, Vol. III, Moscow, 1900, p. 63.

⁸ *Slovar’ russkogo yazyka XI–XVII vv.*, Edn. 6, Moscow, 1979, p. 43.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰ See, for example, the reflections of Orthodox theologian Leonid Ouspensky in his course on iconology, read in Paris in the 1960s: “The world shown to us by the icon is not a world in which not rational categories or human moral, but the divine grace reigns. Hence the hieratism of the icon, its simplicity, its grandeur and tranquillity; hence the rhythm of its lines and the joy of its paints. It reflects both the heroism and the joy of victory. This is sorrow turned into the joy of the living God; this is a new structure in a new creation” (L. A. Ouspensky, *Bogoslovie ikony Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*, Moscow, 1989, pp. 153–154). There are also such concepts as “hieratic school” in Orthodoxy (see K. Y. Skurat, *Istoriya pomestnykh pravoslavnykh tserkvei*, Moscow, 1994, Vol. 2, p. 49).

¹¹ Ronald Hathaway notes that the meaning of this term was once linked to the attributes of an Egyptian rank. See R. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the “Letters” of Pseudo-Dyonisius*, The Hague, 1969, p. XXI.

¹² In *Rudolf Steiner and Goethe in the Disposition of Modernity* (Moscow, 1917), Andrei Bely discusses the changes in states according to Steiner: “The state of perception of the essence of the content in reverse reflection (imagination), in contemplation (inspiration) and in confluence with the essence (intuition). In imagination, inspiration and intuition, we comprehend the idea in *concreto*” (p. 109). Other phrases include “gradations of metamorphoses ... gradation – hierarchy ... gradianly, i.e. flowing” (p. 109), “metamorphosis of ideas ... ideal image is the image of the condensation of the spirit ... the proto-phenomenon is the opening fact; in it, the law is not an abstraction” (p. 103). There are also such neologisms as “other-worlds”.

¹³ An example from one of Nicholas Roerich’s texts (1930): “When erecting confirmed undertakings, it should not be forgotten that what is constructed always gains the upper hand. When building (in the name of the His Holiness) there is only one path which leads to the Creating Source. Each structure demands an understanding of the upwards aspiration. Only the law of listening to the Hierarchy, therefore, can give lawful tension. Only in this way can one understand the path leading to powerful Extremity” (N. K. Roerich, *Derzhava Sveta*, Moscow, 1999, p. 95).

¹⁴ V. Ivanov, *Po zvezdam. Opyty filosofskie, esteticheskie i kriticheskie*, St Petersburg, 1909, pp. 250, 284.

¹⁵ K. Jaspers, *Philosophie*, Bd. I, Berlin, 1956, p. 339.

¹⁶ K. Jaspers, *Philosophie*, Bd. III, Berlin, 1956, p. 192. All subsequent references in the text relate to this book.

¹⁷ See *The Spiritual in Art – Abstract Painting 1890–1985*, Los Angeles Museum, 1986; translated into German as M. Tuchmann, J. Freeman (Hrsg.), *Das Geistige in der Kunst. Abstrakte Malerei 1890–1985*, Stuttgart, 1988.

¹⁸ See the catalogue accompanying the exhibition at the Galerie Gmurzynska in Cologne (1999–2000) – *Organics. The Non-Objective World of Nature in the Russian Avant-Garde of the Twentieth Century*, Moscow, 2000.

¹⁹ See V. N. Toporov, “Vediiskoe rta-: k sootnosheniyu smyslovoi struktury i etimologii”, *Etimologiya* 1979, Moscow, 1981, pp. 139–156.

²⁰ For example: simulacrum Dianae singulari artificio perfectum (simulation of Diana created with singular perfection).

²¹ This duality is also fortified by such modern word usages as *hierai* (priest of the Orthodox church), *hierarchy* (order of subordinations) and *hieroglyphics* (Ancient Egyptian alphabet). The artist himself noted: “Hieratism is a Greek word, meaning the sacred, the spiritual, the sacred-significant – the innermost-signified. A total of fourteen notions.” By “notion”, Shvartsman implied definitions known to him from Dvoretzky’s Ancient Greek-Russian dictionary, quoted here in entirety (without illustrations): “GREEK – (1) great, mighty, powerful; (2) enormous, wild, monstrous; (3) large, weighty; (4) sumptuous, splendid or sacred; (5) marvellous, wondrous, great; (6) sent down by the gods, gracious; (7) under the patronage of the gods, preserved by the gods, pleasing to the gods; (8) dedicated to the gods, inspiring reverence, sacred; (9) inmost; (10) inviolable; (11) cult; (12) organised in honour of the gods, religious; (13) sacred, holy, divine; (13) devoted to divinity, pious” (I. C. Dvoretzky, *Dvrenegrechesko-russkii slovar’*, Moscow, 1958, Vol. 1, p. 815).

²² Isographer (GREEK): icon-painter.

²³ L. A. Ouspensky, *Bogoslovie ikony Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi*, Moscow, 1989, p. 153.

²⁴ Ridolfi claims that Titian painted the body using only four paints. Giacomo Palma the Younger wrote the following about Titian: “He turned his pictures towards the wall, sometimes leaving them in this position for several months; then, desiring to return to them, he scrutinised them with close attention, in order to spot their deficiencies. Revealing features not in keeping with his subtle feeling for beauty, he set about treating the patient, like a kind surgeon, without mercy ... Operating in this manner, he corrected his images and achieved great harmony, manifesting the beauty of art. Working on one picture and waiting for it to dry, he would cross over to another painting and do the exact same with it ... Towards the end, he painted more with his fingers than with the brush” (*Mastera iskusstva ob iskusstve*, Moscow/Leningrad, 1937, Vol. 1, p. 215).

²⁵ St Macarius the Great, “Nastavleniya o khristianskoi zhizni”, *Dobrotolyubie*, Vol. I, Moscow, 1895, p. 274.

²⁶ See C. G. Jung, *Der philosophische Baum*, Bd. 13, Olten und Freiburg, 1987.

²⁷ “The Acts of Peter”, *The Apocryphal New Testament*, translated by M. R. James, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1924.

²⁸ *El Aleph*, 1945, translated by Norman Thomas di Giovanni in collaboration with the author.

²⁹ *Soncino Zohar*, Bereshith, Section 1, Pages 3b–4a.

³⁰ In the Kabbalah, *sphira* (plural *sphiroth*) is a vessel helping to convey the light of the creator to man.

³¹ Ilya Kabakov, 60–e–70–e... *Zapiski o neofitsial’noi zhizni v Moskve*, Wiener Slawistischer Almanach, Sonderband 47, Vienna, 1999, pp. 57–58.

SACRAL-ABSTRACT SYMBOLISM IN THE ART OF MIKHAIL SHVARTSMAN

“Every soul of man has in the way of nature beheld true being;
this was the condition of her passing into the form of man.
But all souls do not easily recall the things of the other world.”
Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249 e–250 a

book), he mixed more actively with writers and poets – particularly in the 1960s and 1970s – than with the nonconformist artists, with whose art his own original oeuvre had little in common.

Mikhail Shvartsman was, nevertheless, someone who will go down in the history of art as an artist. Any investigations into the phenomenon of this remarkable personality, therefore, inevitably encounter his art, which can be formally placed somewhere between constructivism and mysticism. He himself regarded it as less important to create something new and more important to synthesise various cultural achievements, reflected in the parallel use of religiously tinged images of the past, mystical signs, totems, figures of idols and sacral architecture. Despising everything passing and fleeting, avoiding the fashionable and seeking the eternal and intransient, he found or acquired a rich thesaurus of universal laws.

Shvartsman’s oeuvre is symbolical and retrospective, implicitly directed against any form of visionariness projected into the future or the utopias so dear to the hearts of the Soviet intelligentsia during the post-Stalin period. This was his way of distancing himself from others, including the avant-garde artists of the 1920s and even from Kazimir Malevich, with whom he is often and, in another aspect, justifiably compared. In the formal sphere, this stance took the form of an artistic tongue proceeding from an experience of the mystical, incarnated in pathetic, serious and sublime images.

One of the most important preconditions for the formation of Shvartsman’s own emblematic system was the firm conviction that the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial, have common, hierarchically organised structures. Hieratures was the name given by the artist to these all-penetrating, sacral structures – incarnated in the spiritual principles of the Gothic in the West and icons in the East. To designate himself and his pictures, Shvartsman consciously selects terms which cannot be found in any dictionary (the etymological similarity to the concepts of “hierophany” or “hieratic writing” in religious texts is purely coincidental).

Metaphysic, esoteric and mystic are the three definitions most commonly employed by the history of art and art critics to describe the master, whose spirituality is based on the highest achievements of sacral art. Mikhail Shvartsman regarded his task in life as the restoration of the broken link in the Russian spiritual tradition and the building of bridges across the spiritual chasm formed during the Soviet period.

Shvartsman’s unwillingness to contribute to exhibitions was another

attempt to distance himself from others. This was also a logical consequence of his alternative way of thinking, definable by values other than topicality, which he did not pursue. Likewise, he refused to purchase fame by “betraying his children.” As the artist said in 1977, when George Costakis acquired six of his works: “I have betrayed my children.”

Thomas Strauss wrote that Shvartsman was bitterly opposed to any commercial exhibition of his works. In reality, he also opposed the non-commercial – or what would seem to be non-commercial – showing of his works in museums (glossing over the role of museum exhibitions in raising the prices of works on the art market). The consequences of this opposition are clear. Pursuing this clear aim, Shvartsman could not hope to acquire international fame. The nonconformist artists had been forbidden to exhibit. The unwillingness of an artist to want to exhibit – in a certain place, at a certain time, or in a certain context – seems strange. Delving deeper into the situation, however, this was closely tied in with the unhurried and passive nature of a man who once said: “I cannot make myself choose a green, blue or white canvas or a green, blue or white board. They should be the way I find them.”

Exhibiting works implies pushing oneself forwards, offering something or even foisting something on someone. This form of behaviour was deeply alien to an introvert who could spend years working on a single picture. There is also an aspect of meditation. Often, much time had to pass before the picture revealed itself to him.

One can surmise whether or not Mikhail Shvartsman was afraid of being misunderstood. With this risk in mind, he may have preferred to remain a secret to most of the art world. This stance suggests that, consciously or unconsciously, he needed a viewer capable of meditative immersion and guessed that the public would not fully comprehend compositions which might at first sight seem familiar to the viewer, always on the look out for something new in art. If his hieratures were to be regarded as documents or a nonconformist phenomenon, the attempt to read them as a text would inevitably lead to disappointment, owing to the absence of anything truly new. Instead of the new, we encounter forms familiar to us from the avant-garde and classical Western modernism.

Mikhail Shvartsman and his oeuvre demand a form of meditative immersion analogous to the process of the creation of a work of art. The master was wary of the public, except those members selected by himself. He believed that in a world solely orientated on the mundane and the modern, the public would lack the calm, patience, spiritual comprehension and everything else necessary to permit a work of art to reveal itself to us, overcoming all borders.

Mikhail Matveyevich Shvartsman is a unique phenomenon in the Russian school of twentieth-century painting and the history of European art in general. An inventor in the fullest sense of the word, his oeuvre is completely unprecedented, while paying tribute to the religious-mystical experience of mankind (mostly – though not exclusively – the Bible), the artistic achievements associated with this experience (particularly Orthodox icon-painting, although Shvartsman was also interested in the trecento and all mystical-painterly expressions in general), the radical non-objectivity of Kazimir Malevich and the equally radical analytical art of Pavel Filonov. Some art historians have also compared Shvartsman’s oeuvre with totems and Paul Klee. All these analogies fail to take into account, however, the extremely individual nature of the painting and graphic art of the great master of the hierature.

The word *hierature* evokes a whole series of associations. Mikhail Shvartsman came up with the word himself, only not for the sake of a catchy term. This is totally excluded by the master’s approach to art, which he regarded as a prophetic mission, not a hedonistic composition of paints and lines. The artist invented the word out of necessity, to help contemplators better understand his work. Another factor was his love of poetry (and music). He was a friend of many poets and was not against employing neologisms of meaning similar to those of Velimir Khlebnikov.

Hieratures bring out the super-sensual structures of the world as a whole – the body of the world. Shvartsman insisted that this was not an iconnic disclosure of a super-sensual prototype in an image, but a sacral-emblematic revelation of the concealed facets of the countenance of man and everything that constitutes the world. The artist was completely opposed to any attempts to compare his hieratic structures to Orthodox specimens.

Himself an Orthodox believer, he knew that icons belonged to the circle of the church. Their sacred nature proceeds from the incarnation of Christ – the God-Man, true God and true man. An hierat who refused to “anthropomorphise” the world, Shvartsman would have considered any attempts to call his paintings icons as sacrilege.

Mikhail Shvartsman was born into a non-religious Jewish family. As an adult, he found allies in the Hebrew tradition (the secret signs and numbers of the Kabbalah) and such thinkers as Lev Shestov (whose real name was Shvartsman and possibly even a relative) and Søren Kierkegaard (Shestov was one of the first European philosophers to “discover” the Danish paradoxalist in the early twentieth century).

While drawing a clear line between the icon and the hierature, we can nevertheless discern several aspects of Shvartsman’s painting closely linked to the icon-painting tradition.

One such aspect is the conceptual aspect. As in the philosophical-theological doctrine of images – St John of Damascus, St Theodore of Studium and Patriarch Nicephoros of Constantinople – the visible

arises out of the invisible. While the principle is the same, the actual work is not similar. In an icon, as we have already seen, everything proceeds from the incarnation of the Son of God; icon-painting employs “realism” (albeit in an extremely symbolical form). In the hierature, the invisible is not conveyed “realistically”, i.e. in anthropomorphic categories. Although this might seem an oxymoron, Shvartsman’s symbolism is abstract. The symbolical power of this anamnesis is clear, however, when one recalls that the “signs of the mystical experience are displayed by the popular consciousness, fore-memory, fore-consciousness” (Shvartsman). As a result, the hierat artist “is always, according to the measure of his abilities, clinging in recollection to those things in which God abides”, as Plato wrote in *Phaedrus* (249 c). The Greek philosopher continues in the following vein, corresponding perfectly to the ecstatic essence of the hierat: “And he who employs aright these memories is ever being initiated into perfect mysteries and alone becomes truly perfect. But, as he forgets earthly interests and is rapt in the divine, the vulgar deem him mad, and rebuke him; they do not see that he is inspired” (249 c-d).

The second aspect of the link between Shvartsman’s oeuvre and icon-painting is the technical aspect. The artist painted in tempera on boards primed with levkas. He regarded oil as too harsh and advised his students to “degrease” it. In *Iconostasis*, Father Pavel Florensky classifies oil as a bearer of the sensual-material, conveying the colours of the earth and the flesh. Tempera, however, brings out the ontotheological element. Although Florensky was not part of Shvartsman’s first circle of reading, the idea of the “consistency of paint” – differing in tempera and oil – can be applied to the artist’s painting technique.

Shvartsman did not work like an icon-painter. When necessary, particularly in large works, he added sand and sawdust to the paints, continuing the experiments with texture begun by the classical Russian avant-garde. The artist also preferred boards to canvas – Florensky advances some interesting thoughts on this subject in *Iconostasis* – for purely painterly-technical reasons, regarding a board as more “taught” and less “vacillating”, thus better suited to the hieratic step.

The third aspect is the iconological aspect. Such masterpieces as *Herald* and *Paternal Structure* could not have appeared without the emblematic system of the icon. The almond-shaped eyes, mystically squinting eyes, lines for the nose and lips and the stylised beards in the traditions of icons of the Saviour Not Made by Human Hands or *The Ancient of Days* all proceed from icon-painting. While these external associations are evident, the artist himself regarded such images as “meta-portraits” – a secret and invisible structure of the human countenance or the “reason for a face”; not a countenance in itself. This feature is particularly evident in *Personal Name* (Mikhail), demonstrating Shvartsman’s clear difference to Paul Klee, with whom he has been compared. Klee’s *Angelus Novus* was both a manifestation of the invisible and a breakthrough

into the future in anthropomorphic-existential categories in which fear plays a prominent role. As far as totems are concerned, a totem mask closes up, while the "meta-portrait" opens and reveals.

Before creating the meta-portraits, Mikhail Shvartsman passed through a figurative period. Although he had drawn ever since he was a child, until the age of twenty-five he did not receive an education in the fine arts – only in music. During his period of compulsory military service, the artist created an outstanding series of figurative drawings, including *Self-Portrait* and the *Army Album* (1949). Accurately portraying his fellow soldiers and officers, the *Army Album* was a form of exercise in which the self-taught artist demonstrated his remarkable mastery and faithfulness to the principles of realism.

Following his demobilisation in 1950, Mikhail Shvartsman studied at the Stroganov School of Art in Moscow, graduating in 1956. After two years of "boring work" as principal designer of the Education Pavilion at the Exhibition of Economic Achievements (1957–59), he worked on a freelance basis for various publishing houses, designing books, posters and advertisements. In these works, the artist betrays his excellent constructive feeling based on the traditions of Russian *lubok* and eighteenth-century books (Shvartsman's design of Emma Moshkovskaya's *Presents in the Park* is a true masterpiece). Many books reflect the ornamental aroma of illustrations to Jewish folk tales (*Agada* or *Sholom Aleichem*). This is particularly evident in the advertisements for the *Soviet Export* magazine (1970) and the cover of Emma Moshkovskaya's *Presents in the Park*. The buds of the future emblematic system can also be spotted in such works as the *Equestrian Circus* poster (1967), albeit still in a figurative form.

The emblematic finally triumphed over the figurative when Shvartsman was appointed principal designer of the Special Bureau of Art and Construction in 1966. He worked there for nineteen years, designing trademarks for light industry distinguished for their archaic and contemporary structure, permitting a whole host of diverse variations. This particular musical term corresponds perfectly to the hieratures painted during Shvartsman's period of graphic activities at the Special Bureau of Art and Construction.

The hieratures are constructed like Bach's fugues. Shvartsman is a painter and a musician. The hieratures are architectural, austere, complex and multi-planar. There is little point attempting to seek any meaning in their titles. As is often the case, the titles are arbitrary, approximate and, in the majority of cases, mnemotechnical.

It is equally impossible to decipher these monumental constructions. Every hierature is a structure of countless inner awakenings, dictating the tracings, spaces and cells to the hand. There is a similarity here with Wassily Kandinsky's *inner necessity* and André Breton's *dictat del pensament*, although Mikhail Shvartsman's picturology – interpretation of the surface using painterly resources – is the exact opposite of the "hieroglyphisation" of the objective world in Kandinsky's poetics or the disclosure of the unexplored regions of the

subconscious in Surrealist poetics. Another external similarity – the spontaneity of the painterly gesture and mind-spirit-soul in a state of sleep – is realised differently. Kandinsky and the Surrealists conveyed this with the help of hieroglyphs – stylised signs of reality or the narrative elements of their vision. In Shvartsman's case, however, we witness the birth of new, hitherto non-existent lands – new spaces not linked or related to any notions at all.

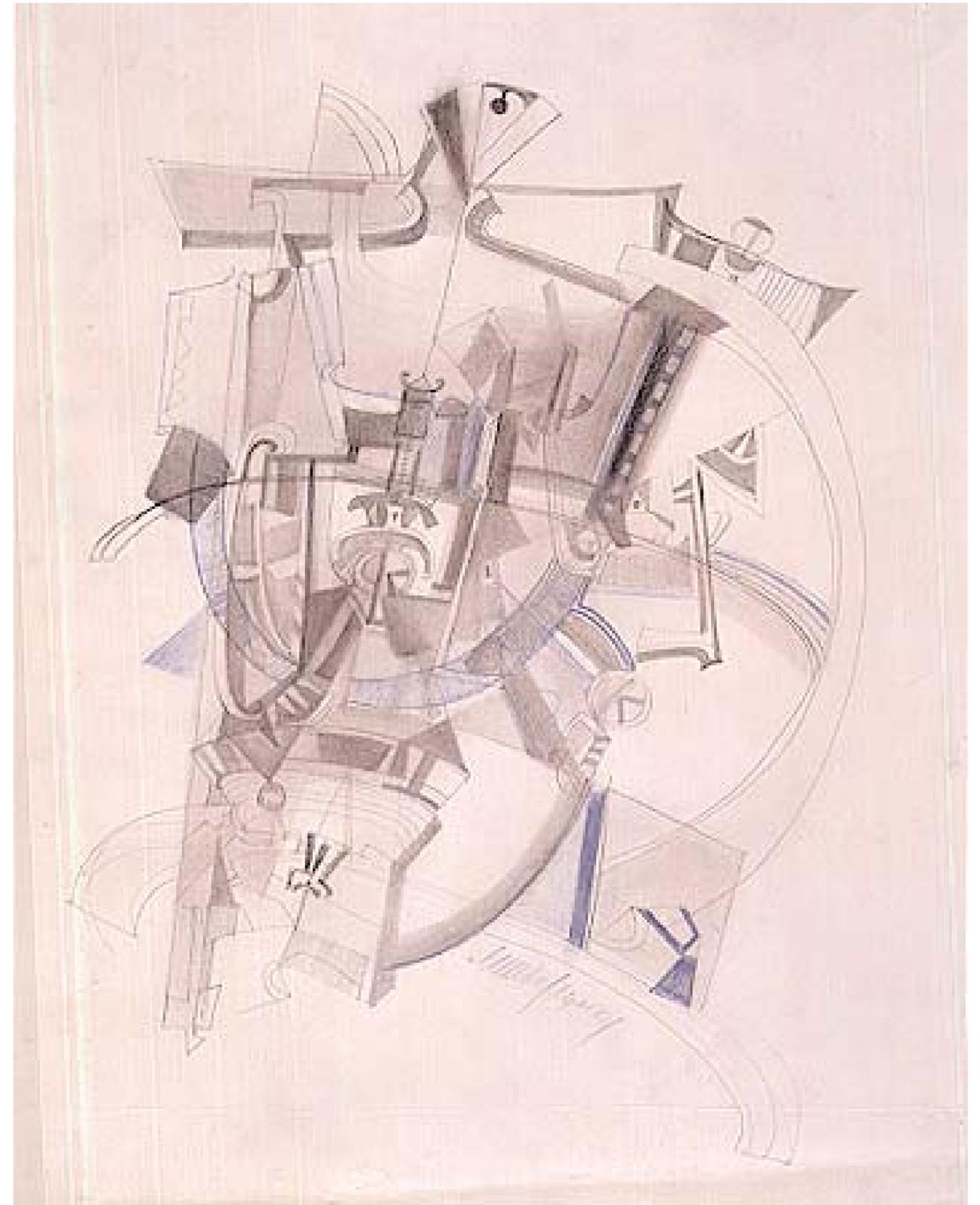
Mikhail Shvartsman's art is hermetic. It can be regarded as reflecting the geography of his painterly thought and, like any geographic landscape created from self-sufficient rhythms, lines and colours, is not easy to explain. Wandering along mysterious paths and alleyways, the eye loses its way in the labyrinths, seeking only a meditative insight into the world of spiritual combinations and harmonious associations.

Mikhail Shvartsman paints, meditates and prays, as in the archaic calligraphic gesture of oriental tradition. The difference between the artist's spiritual-painterly act and the latter gesture (as in Zen Buddhism) is the complicated construction of his pictures (what the Constructivist writers would have called "loading"), making him, to a certain extent, the conceptual heir of Pavel Filonov. This complicated construction would appear to reflect the influence of Hebrew-Christian – Talmudic, Kabbalistic or religious-philosophical – outlooks. When Shvartsman worked on a picture, he never knew when it would be finished. The hierature was a never-ending melody, which is how it appears to our contemplation today. In his approach to his pictures, Shvartsman compared himself to Abraham moving from Canaan to the promised land. When he saw it, he knew that his journey had come to an end.

While the construction of his hierature paintings and drawing structures is extremely complex, Shvartsman aspires towards a minimal colour scheme. In most cases, there is one dominant colour – red in *Omnivision*, blue in *Gates of Truth* and lilac in *Primrose*. The artist generally employed four colours, claiming that five was depravity and six was an absolute orgy. He liked ultramarine and did not like cobalt. Shvartsman adored Rembrandt's "tempered colour" and there is indeed an element of the latter's deep, rich and light-dark colour schemes in his art. The master spent years painting *Habitat of the Blues* (1982–87), in which the power of one colour gave birth to, inhabited and built up the space.

This economic use of the paint reflects Mikhail Shvartsman's disdain for what he called "motleyness". The artist defined the style of his painting with the help of such enigmatic expressions as "upholding the ring" or "motleyness occurs when there is no ring." What does "upholding the ring" mean? Shvartsman would seem to be saying that, in its finished form, a work conceptually constitutes a closed circle or ring – bounded, taut and complete. The ring is a form of microcosm or a monad leading its own life, in which all parts are merged and united. The hierature is the spiritual body of man and the world or a temple.

Following Nikolai Berdyaev, chipping away at the truth in typical Russian fashion, Nikolai Punin wrote that Pablo Picasso was not the start of the new, but the end of the old art. Mikhail Shvartsman can be regarded as the start of new poetics in the sense that he provided the impulse for a whole new line of Russian art, one which might be nominally entitled Hieratic Symbolism.



Hieratures of Truth Cycle. No. 45. 1989

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THE BIBLICAL ROOTS OF HIERATISM

Mikhail Shvartsman is an artist with a concrete spiritual experience, comparable to the thoughts of the famous mystics of the past. A sense of real knowledge of the metaphysical grounds of existence led him to call his pictures hieratures. Although this term has now come to be accepted, it is often interpreted in a vague and indistinct way. There is a constant temptation to adapt it to the concept of “individual mythology” – popular since the early 1970s and permitting the subjective and arbitrary use of emblematic ciphers and symbols. Although such an interpretation slots Mikhail Shvartsman’s hieratism into the clearly developed and strictly observed scenario of postmodernism, it leads us far away from the true state of affairs. The master did not regard himself as a mystical individualist or *Glasperlenspieler*. On the contrary, he believed that he was rooted in the biblical tradition. This small essay will attempt to demonstrate this, on the basis of many years of personal contacts with the artist himself and a theological-aesthetic analysis of his oeuvre.

Mikhail Shvartsman’s inner world was filled with biblical images and terms. The best analogy in the history of art is Rembrandt, the main difference being that the Dutch master projected his experience of reading the Bible onto a realistic plane, whereas Shvartsman addressed the sources of biblical inspirations, forming sacral sign-links. This formed the foundation of the entire stylistics of his hieratic forms, devoid of the slightest hint of illustrativeness or subject-matter. When perceiving these forms, it is important to avoid two typical stereotypes. The hierature is not a picture on a religious theme; it does not aspire to be, in the words of St Gregory the Great, a “Bible for the illiterate” – a pious image painted in an accessible representational style with instructive-catechismal aims. Neither should it be confused with the icon, which has a predominantly liturgical function. The hierature is a new type of sacral sign, nourished by biblical inspirations.

The hierature is a consolidated “sign of the Spirit of the Lord”. In this respect, it is capable of expressing spiritual situations not directly dependent on biblical texts. A series of works by Mikhail Shvartsman, however, do incarnate his experience of reading the Bible. This is particularly interesting as the artist did not generally feel the need to give his works verbal explanations or titles. As he himself said: “Any naming (verbal naming) of the hierature is merely a tribute to the common emotional ‘ordering’, that is, the custom of ‘storing’ and crowning with a ‘name tag’.” A visually incarnated hierature was, in his view, a sufficient equivalent of a “name” and did not need to be transposed into words. In a note accompanying the album of Shvartsman’s works published by the Russian Museum in 2001, the editors noted that “the titles of works were given by the artist nominally, at the request of the curators of his one-man show at the Tretyakov Gallery in 1994.”

Every rule has exceptions, however, and these offer us a better insight into Shvartsman’s hieratic experience. One particularly expressive and symptomatic exception is the way in which the artist addressed the image of King David.

The Psalms of David occupied an extremely important place in the life of Mikhail Shvartsman. In a certain sense, they were a paradigm of his hieratic creativity as such. He knew many psalms by heart and enjoyed quoting his favourite lines, which acquired an unusual life-likeness and realistic correlation to his existence. He repeated the concluding lines of Psalm 90 with great emotion, on a par with what

was known in medieval times as the “lachrymal gift”: “Establish thou the work of our hands upon us; yea, the work of our hands establish thou it.” These words also offered a reflection of his own existence, for he could not imagine his own art without the “establishment” of God.

Shvartsman also adored Psalm 91. He bore the difficulties of life with the same meekness advocated by King David and often repeated: “The Lord hear thee in the day of trouble; the name of the God of Jacob defend thee” (Psalm 20:1).

One of Mikhail Shvartsman’s finest drawings of the early 1970s reflects the artist’s own special relationship with the image of King David, revealing the most important elements of sacral emblems in the artist’s perception. This work provides a direct path to the hieratures, anticipating their compositional logicity (“sign-links”), even though the construction of the image still appears to be related to objective representationalism – unlike the abstract style of his later “hieratic structures”, liberated from all elements of anthropomorphism. The figure of King David forms an emblematic unity with the portal of a temple. The floral-like bases of the temple columns are covered in the text of the first psalm. This is the image of a man whose “delight is in the law of the Lord; and in His law doth he meditate day and night” (Psalm 1:2). Such permanent reflection – known as *theonoesis* in Orthodox tradition or *meditation* in the West – was a typical feature of Shvartsman’s inner world. The artist regarded the act of creativity as a form of reflection on the law of the Lord, over which he “meditated day and night”. Night implied a time when he could immerse in contemplation, alone or in silence, exploring the “mouths and entrances into the secret” (“Renounce yourself and you will see”).

Such reflections in the spirit of the first psalm make a man “like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper” (Psalm 1:3). In the sphere of the aesthetic consciousness, this leads to a style combining form-creative elements in eidetic and organic unity. While Shvartsman’s hieratic structures are ideally constructed and “verbally” distinct (in the Byzantine sense), the artist also lends them a plant-like character – unlike many twentieth-century masters who lifelessly interpreted geometric forms. The idea (*eidōs*) of the work appears as a life-imbued revelation of a higher world. In the picture, King David holds a flower, conjuring up associations with a “primeval plant” in the spirit of Goethe, who said in reply to Schiller’s accusation that his pencil sketch of the *Urpflanze* was not an experience, but an idea: “Well! I am glad that I have got ideas, without knowing it, and that I see them with my eyes.” The flower in Shvartsman’s drawing is not an allegory; it is something revealed through “intelligent vision”. This is the complete opposite of a mechanistic-analytical, destructive approach to nature. The secrets of nature were only revealed in creative contemplation, not in decompositional intellectual supposition.

Mikhail Shvartsman also painted a tempera image of King David at the time of the completion of his period of “countenances” and transition to non-objective hieratures. Unlike the majority of “countenances”, this painting evokes the initial impression of an unfinished work. The master understood the necessity of leaving certain works in an unfinished state, expressing the spontaneous and visionary nature of his oeuvre. The image of King David is not given in Shvartsman’s

usual, precise form; it establishes the “sign of the Spirit” revealed to the artist, not requiring any subsequent following of the “sacrificial flow of metamorphoses”. Regarding this particular “countenance” as self-sufficient, the master probably saw no need for any further working.

Although the colour schemes of Mikhail Shvartsman’s pictures are extremely characteristic, the artist does not seem to have consciously “constructed” the logic of the colour combinations. They came to him in moments of hieratic contemplation, without any abstract-rational considerations of colour symbolism. Viewers should, however, be aware of the spiritual laws concealed within the master’s works.

The interpretation of the colour sign is particularly important in the light of the importance of the image of King David for understanding the essence of Shvartsman’s hieratic concept. The artist regarded David as a paradigmatic incarnation of ideal messianic-prophetic service, orientating himself on this in his oeuvre. Raised in an atmosphere of postmodernism and the post-avant-garde, it is extremely difficult for the modern mind to perceive and correctly interpret the meaning of this directive. Elevated to the level of a compulsory norm, aesthetic relativism and playful scepticism obstruct a serious approach to the prophetic dimension of Shvartsman’s hieratism. The erudite mind either classifies such creativity as an aesthetic utopia in the style of the early twentieth century or fails to responsibly perceive the master’s witnesses of the possibility of a concrete spiritual experience in modern art.

Mikhail Shvartsman’s hieratism does not have anything in common with utopias. It is based on a strict and realistic approach to the

question of the cognition of God. The possibility of ascending towards contemplation of the “thought-essences of the spiritual sphere” or the “world of the spiritual hierarchy” was a condition not only of creativity, but of existence itself.

The concept of “hierarchism”, linked to the biblically substantiated doctrine of the spiritual world, was of particular importance for Mikhail Shvartsman’s understanding of the value of artistic form. He drew a distinct line between “paternal” and “filial” biblical structures. The concepts of the “father” and “son” found canonic visual equivalents in his oeuvre. Although the form could be abstract and non-anthropomorphic, it was perceived as a distinct and readable sign, embodying, for example, a theophanic sign of God the Father. One of the master’s most outstanding works of the early 1960s was entitled *Filial Hierarchy*, implying that the form-image was structuralised on the basis of the laws of God the Son.

Signs of the world of angels also occupied a prominent place in Mikhail Shvartsman’s oeuvre. Many “countenances” of the 1960s were called *Herald* – the Russian translation of the Greek word for angel. *Good Herald*, *Herald of Morning*, *Angel of Festive Morning* and several other works reflect the concrete experience of angelic hierarchies.

Much work still remains to be done on deciphering these signs from another world, including a stylistic analysis. This ought to demonstrate their genetical kinship with medieval hieratics, revealing elements corresponding to a new stage in the development of biblically orientated religious-aesthetic perception.



Mikhail Shvartsman in front of trade marks designed by his team of artists

We break with the dry, dinned-in design of geometric combinations levelling out the original and unique individual. We break with illustrative false-significant posing and impertunate thematicness, which is not typical of the structure of the sign. With new transformations, we spontaneously incarnate the eternal dream of a magic sign. We intensely seek the fullness of designation, a high emblematic independence and the good silence of the hierarchic taur.

Principal designer of the graphic section of the Special Bureau of Art and Construction
[For the Special Bureau of Art and Construction exhibition in Warsaw]

Mikhail Shvartsman

MEMORIES OF MIKHAIL SHVARTSMAN

After work, Mikhail Matveyevich used to go for a walk with his students. Discussing art and other things, they would visit second-hand bookshops in search of inexpensive volumes and engravings. Or they would go to a museum, where Mikhail Matveyevich would show them what they should concentrate on in their own work or would share his delight at a particular masterpiece.

When we visited a museum together, he would say: "There is no need to stare gormlessly at each work. If you do, the end result will only be fatigue and exhaustion. Glancing round the room, you should choose what is worth looking at and, only then, approach it and take it in."

They enjoyed their contact and conversations on their strolls. Mikhail Matveyevich loved them all and they repaid him in kind. Someone once told me that they had observed this procession. Shvartsman was floating along in the middle, like a large fish slowly moving its fins, surrounded by scurrying minnows.

They would then come home and Mikhail Matveyevich would cry from the door: "Irochka, give us something to eat and a cup of tea!" I was happy in this aura of love.

May 2002

Iraida Shvartsman

Mikhail Matveyevich was the epicentre of everything that was going on; its ferment and its arbitrator. He had an enchanting personality. Many of us categorically and passionately rejected all that we had previously liked, accepting what was being offered in its place with remarkable ease. What was offered was not anything bad, but the complete opposite – a multitude of new worlds. Our previous worlds, however, were closed to us for years. For a long time, Shvartsman's tastes and passions became our own tastes and passions. Mikhail Matveyevich captured the minds of many of us for various periods. Even our lexicon changed, supplemented by Shvartsman's own expressions, which even now instantly determines if a person is a "friend" or "foe".

Shvartsman had the ability to enthuse, encourage and look at things in his own unique way. This made women feel that they were attractive and men that they were talented.

We ourselves, our families, our parents, our various relationships – all this was of great interest to Mikhail Matveyevich. Besides his deep self-immersion and absolute self-sufficiency, he also had the gift of being able to scrutinise the lives of those around him and, sometimes, of penetrating right to the very heart of the situation.

While Mikhail Matveyevich gave all of us a great deal, each perceived it as he or she could, in line with their own strengths and abilities. To say that we were students of Shvartsman would be both presumptuous and impertinent. I think that there were few students among us – if there were any at all. And if there were, were they really needed? That is the question. Many wanted to be his students, some did something, but did anyone succeed?

Mikhail Matveyevich is an inexhaustible theme. Fortunately, there are no reasons – at least in this rare case – for regret about another "prophet without honour in his own land." We understood only too well whom life had brought us into contact with. Mikhail Matveyevich himself contributed much to this understanding. Even if there was something hypnotic about his self-sensation, this was no cause for concern. From the very outset, he helped us, with great accuracy, to define his own place in the corresponding system of coordinates. No insults, arguments or passions could destroy this understanding. Luckily, we have not canonised Shvartsman or made short shrift, with the aid of

treacle and syrup, of the image of this remarkable man. Sentimental apocrypha would only have emasculated our memories of him.

Our penultimate meeting took place one and a half years earlier, at Shvartsman's enormous one-man show at the Tretyakov Gallery. This was a major event, deservedly surrounded by a great deal of pomp. The most amazing thing was that at the age of sixty-nine – not so old today – Mikhail Matveyevich looked like a wizened sage or a religious forefather. Inviting the enormous crowd into the exhibition rooms, he proclaimed: "Welcome to the third millennium!"

March 2002

Olga Velchinskaya

I remember one early evening in the middle of May, when we were sitting in a state of blissful relaxation in the small park at the gates of the Andronnikov Monastery. Mikhail Matveyevich had the ability to increase the powers of perception of whoever he was talking to, lending him part of his own vision. Casting a happy look around him, he said in a particularly heartfelt manner: "Remember all of this. When life shows you its other face, judge it only by such moments."

I believe that many can rightfully say that they were in close contact with Mikhail Matveyevich. This was one of the aspects of his talent – the ability to engage in a dialogue of the souls, instantly breaking down all the barriers between his conversation partners. But I remember his words: "You cannot even begin to imagine how lonely old Shvartsman is."

Mikhail Matveyevich said: "The most precious thing a student can derive from the Shvartsman school is the clear realisation of one's hierarchy."

His faith made him both imperious and childishly joyful in his hours of work. He was both incredibly generous and pitiless, all at the same time. It was a remarkable lesson in humility to observe how he sacrificed, with his steady hand, a precious and living piece of the painting fabric for the sake of the crystal clarity of the sign.

All of Shvartsman's boards were a stratification of sometimes dozens of pictures, each of them covering the essence projected from unde-



Exhibition at the Municipal Committee of Graphic Artists (Mikhail Shvartsman's first show)
From the left: Vladimir Yankilevsky, Vyacheslav Kalinin, Mikhail Shvartsman, Dmitry Komissarov
May 1983

picted spaces. The living hieratic sign grew like a thousand-year-old capital city, retaining the concept of the first victory, the memory of sieges, constructions, floods, migrations, revolutions and golden periods in its outer appearance... The great concentration – Mikhail Matveyevich called his labour "prayer by deed" – made the hours seem like years.

Sitting in front of a finished work, Mikhail Matveyevich once commented on this sensation of great existential potency: "If it falls, it will create a hole in the earth."

Over the years that I knew Mikhail Matveyevich, his outer appearance changed – from a virtually physically perceptible fiery energy to the unusual transparency of the last years. I remember taking leave of him and Iraida Alexandrovna in 1991, before their departure for the Holy Land. This was the first time that I had seen the works of his latest and most sublime period. Blessing me at the door, he said: "There, consider that you have already visited the Holy Land." He seemed to be surrounded by a haze of white light.

2002

Dmitry Komissarov

Moscow in 1966. Fifteen of us had come to work at the Special Bureau of Art and Construction. We were selected by Mikhail Matveyevich Shvartsman – the principal designer of the graphic section.

Greeting each of us, the "boss" stood up, bowed and welcomed us in a most un-Soviet manner, through extremely gallant fashion, kissing some hands and telling us how fine we all looked.

He called us geniuses when he saw our first, unprofessional studies and we believed him. A pleasant, ironic and good-natured game proceeded... But work also proceeded. All this was, in fact, extremely serious.

Things completely new to us – ranging from prehistoric hieroglyphs, signs and stamps to the modern (*fin-de-siècle*) Western and Russian avant-garde and the Moscow underground – were explained (during and after consultations) in great detail, with sheer intellectual brilliance, in a special and unprecedented language ("the right of chance to an image", for example, about Jackson Pollock).

Working under the leadership of Mikhail Matveyevich, we gradually came into contact with a philosophy that, to a considerable extent, formed us (me).

We did not just work. Without being aware of it ourselves, we also learnt to think in terms of the new system of Shvartsman's coordinates. Instead of a figurative object, for example, there was a sign image. Not a Renaissance face, but a countenance. Instead of naturalistic wood, birds or clouds – their signs. Not the light and shade of space, but the magical surface of the white sheet of paper or the painterly surface, magical curves, tense plastic relations and tension taken

to the level of the transcendental or a bewitching extra- and over-figurativeness.

Mikhail Matveyevich taught us how to transform form. This was the main thing in his school. Transformation as a method of work.

2002

I. V. Mudrova

The portrait of an artist is his work.
But I saw the master before I saw his painting.

A bear had come to see us – this was my impression from my first meeting with Mikhail Shvartsman. It took place in 1966, when he was appointed head designer of the graphic sector at the newly-opened Special Bureau of Art and Construction.

Twice a week, Shvartsman gave consultations to young artists. He spent all his time drawing, in the same way as children drew on blotters and in school diaries and jotters. This freedom of drawing was remarkable and to this day remains one of the main impressions from the master's oeuvre. Freedom in any un-free time.

Thanks to Shvartsman, many of us began putting together libraries. He loved to visit second-hand bookshops with his students. He would say: "Look, there it is!" And so we became the owners of old maps, ships, portals, miniatures and paintings. He later chose books for his grandson Mitya.

"Wake up, you heap of crap! shouted the orderly," Shvartsman enjoyed telling army jokes and singing songs from that time, like *The flowers do not blossom for me...*

He spent five years in the army. That time might have been lost...

"I am on heat," Shvartsman would say, "just imagine – Cézanne did not even go to his mother's funeral. He could not tear himself away from the canvas."

Today, beauty is *persona non grata*. For Shvartsman, however, beauty was extremely necessary.



Group of graphic artists who worked under Mikhail Shvartsman at the Special Bureau of Art and Construction. 1967

He had the gift of sight. He could find delight in a little-known canvas at a museum or a flaking wall on the street washed in urine. When my son and I were travelling in Italy, Mitya said to me: "I saw that at grandfather's house." Although Shvartsman did not own any images of Rome, Florence or Assisi, his paintings were permeated with the energies of world culture.

Mikhail Shvartsman's birthday was on 4 June. Lilac stood in buckets and there was always a thunderstorm. The longest toast was by Ilya Kabakov and the shortest was by Sergei Barkhin [theatrical designer].

In the morning, when we left the house, the dawn was breaking and the birds were singing.

Shvartsman did not lack the attention of contemporaries. Some were extremely positive, calling him the patriarch of catacomb art. Others were baffled. Others were aggressively negative. Although he had a constant stream of visitors, he suffered from loneliness, miscomprehension and betrayal. He said, however, that "God is with us, whom I fear."

The master presented me with a book that he had illustrated, inscribed with the words *Hold onto your childhood*. An almost Gospel-like text. Only this is not easy. I still speak with Shvartsman and hope to continue this conversation for as long as possible.

May 2002

Mikhail Fedorov

My notes on "what Shvartsman said to me" will, perhaps, surprise those who knew Mikhail Matveyevich, worked alongside him, saw his works and loved him, both as an artist and a man.

M. M. said that the most difficult form of art to understand was painting and that even a very good musician did not understand painting, although a good artist always understood music – and not only music, but other forms of art as well.

He told me that painting should be strange and, above all, dreamy.

Going to see him in the evening, I usually stayed there until midnight. Before saying goodbye to me, Mikhail Matveyevich would



Entrance to the Special Bureau of Art and Construction, where Mikhail Shvartsman worked for nineteen years. 25 December Street, Moscow. Photographed in 2003

always present me with something – a book or a photograph with a dedicatory inscription, a reproduction or some other handsome object. A copper cross on a satin lace. He once even gave me a brass crucifixion dating from the eighteenth or nineteenth century.

Down in the courtyard, on the street, a little boy was running about. He wore a very beautiful, golden-yellow cap. Mikhail Matveyevich said to me: “Look at that layer of paint! Just like Renoir!”

M. M. said of Kuzma Petrov-Vodkin’s painting: “You can see the bottom.”

When I asked him if he liked Ancient Indian sculpture, M. M. gave the following reply: “Too much sperm, old man.”

Shvartsman said that Melchior Feselen’s *Allegory of Fairness* was the pearl of the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts.

We both adored the Primitive artist Niko Pirosmeni. We particularly liked *Margarita the Actress*.

Shvartsman was once asked: “Name three artists who stand out in the entire history of painting.” He replied: “Uccello, Rublev and Vermeer.”

He loved the Russian icons of the twelfth to sixteenth centuries, admiring the beauty and density of their colour and their lyricism. He preferred icons to the ancient mosaics of Ravenna.

M. M. spoke about “dreamy painting”, the “weirdness” of Gogol and the tales of Hoffmann. He particularly liked Hans Christian Andersen’s fairytales, Charles Perrot and children. He once said that everything was created by love. Everything! Including painting!

2002 *Mark Abramovich*

To my dear Valery Bashenin
Mikhail Shvartsman,
An Hierat by the Grace of God

You fear the blue
The flowers are flattened out
Nestled by luxury
The moisture is flattened out
The pen is flattened out
The gardens are flattened out
The sycamore fore-green of leaves

You fear the blue
The fore-yellow of a Vermeer dream
The fore-silver in the hallway of honeyed calm
The fore-rustling of dragonflies
With fore-moth wings

You fear the blue
Behind everything lies something different:
the different shines
the different silvers
the different in colours
the different in calm
you fear the blue
Moscow, 1974–75

This poem contains everything that linked Shvartsman and myself – the secret of painting, love of it and love of the divine creation. Just as accidents never happen, it was no accident that Shvartsman and I met.

This meeting took place in 1968, at the Moscow apartment of Timur Zulfikarov. A friend and I brought round a large roll of our works and spread them out all over the entire floor. I was terribly nervous. I had

already heard a lot about Shvartsman, whom Timur described as a “dreadful person.” Shvartsman examined our works closely, making some witty comments. He proved to be extremely sociable, not terrifying at all, and said some nice things about our works.

Our friendship began with walks around Moscow. We wandered through the places that he loved and knew by heart. These were extremely instructive promenades. I then enrolled at the Stroganov School of Art and our walks became less frequent than I would have liked. We often visited museums together. There, in the quiet halls, he showed me things I never knew. Everything happened as if by magic, without dictation, without any exertion. At the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, he showed me the works that he himself often came to look at (Sassetta, Fungai, the monogrammist AB and others). We often visited the Tretyakov Gallery. We also attended exhibitions in private apartments and semi-underground and banned shows. Life was bubbling; exciting new names were appearing. There were also many interesting official exhibitions. Shvartsman and I once visited an exhibition of peasant portraiture on Kuznetsky Most. The show was excellent, with each portrait better than the last. One portrait was so good that Mikhail Matveyevich asked me to cover for him, so he could place his hand on the canvas and feel it. He suggested that I do the same, saying that this was of great help for an artist...

Sometimes we visited the markets where they sold painted wooden toys from Gorky Region. There were eggs, tumblers, wine-glasses, nestling dolls and vases – genuine works of folk art. We often bought them, as they did not cost much. Mikhail Matveyevich particularly liked to buy the small plates sold with flower and vegetable seeds. The sellers decorated their packets of seed with small wooden plates, masterly illustrated with paintings of the future fruits and flowers. Shvartsman was enthralled by them. These “masterpieces” reminded him of the early Italians. But our attempts to persuade them to sell them were useless. Not a single seed seller succumbed.

My whole world was overturned when I first crossed the threshold of Shvartsman’s apartment and saw his canvases. His paintings conjured up associations with magic sounds and, at the same time, some form of celestial hush. This is impossible to explain. Mikhail Matveyevich also showed me several folders of drawings. The drawings were closer to my heart and easier to understand. I felt like I was in a dream from all that I saw. This state is very difficult for me to describe, even now. Many years have passed, yet they are still very much alive in my memory.

I am eternally indebted to Shvartsman for these first meetings. Mikhail Matveyevich became my first and only spiritual mentor. He later urged me to be baptised and was the godfather at my christening. From that time onwards, he called me his “godson”.

The idea of creating a school of hierature came to Shvartsman in a dream. He once appeared at my door, in the summer of 1975, in a state of great excitement and agitation. Going outside, he began to walk up and down, discussing how he would go about organising this school. He decided to select five students – Anatoly Chaschinsky, Nikita Medvedev, Gennady Spirin, Mikhail Fedorov and myself.

We worked at a studio in Sokolniki. At our first meeting, Shvartsman read a prayer and we began work. By this time, he had already gone over a lot of things in his head. Everything began with a still-life, if you can call that of a construction made of two stools with something placed inbetween. An hour later, he took them away and suggested that we fantasise and seek a sign. This was our first acquaintance with meta-tecture. Our classes were held four and sometimes five days a week and continued for almost four years, from 1975 to 1978. Mikhail Matveyevich bought a large number of technical-drawing boards, canvases and everything needed to make a chalk priming. We glued the canvas to the board, prepared the chalk priming and primed the

canvases. We painted on the chalk priming in casein-oil tempera. This was a unique tempera, the only one of its kind, unfortunately no longer to be found.

I will not discuss any conceptual questions here, as Mikhail Matveyevich has already expounded them himself in his writings. Although Shvartsman had a large circle of acquaintances, with people coming to visit him from Petersburg and abroad, he related to many things in principle, in the spirit of his creative and life concepts. Very few people really understood him. His closest and dearest friend was Irina Alexandrovna. Sharing all his joys and sorrows, she genuinely understood his art.

I would compare Shvartsman to a Renaissance master and, I think, many would agree with me.

He once said: “Malevich suspected God; I affirm Him!”

28 January 2003 *Valery Bashenin*

In 1975, Mikhail Matveyevich decided to create the hieratic school. I was one of the few students. The classes were held at Anatoly Chaschinsky’s studio on Korolenko Street in Sokolniki, in the basement of an old house built at the turn of the century.

The cellar on Korolenko Street had hardly any natural lighting. The few cracks in the windows, through which the dull spring rays shone, were sealed up and we worked in artificial light.

We saw Mikhail Matveyevich almost every day. After the classical schooling I had received at the Moscow Secondary School of Art and the Stroganov School of Art and Industry, I was staggered at the first lesson, which began with what seemed to be a simple task. Mikhail Matveyevich piled a heap of junk, stools, broken chairs and rags on top of one another, forming something like a tower. We, who had already graduated from art school, sat around this monstrosity with sheets of paper. The teacher’s words were simple: “What you see is a town, draw it.” Somewhat unwillingly, with a mien on our faces, we began “drawing”. Some time passed. Mikhail Matveyevich sat in the corner, sketching something on a piece of paper. We exchanged glances, but Shvartsman remained silent. After some time, I noted that we were all caught up in our work. Mikhail Matveyevich looked at us clandestinely, out of his expressive eyes. I was entranced. I suddenly saw the space, fantastic architecture, air and dawn in all this junk. I began to think and, while retaining the original form, my fantasy spilled out onto the paper. It was absorbing and I understood the ingenious nature of the task. On our very first day, the teacher had given us an opportunity, which none of us had ever experienced before in our classical studies – to think in space through form, volume and image; to be free and liberated on the paper. This was the first day of much hard toil, which gave me everything – an understanding of form, colour, line, tone and mastery.

We learnt how to prepare boards and chalk priming, we primed and painted, puttied and polished, wiped and washed, framed and restored – everything. Our practical activities alternated with conversations on painting, art in general and Orthodoxy.

We often visited the Tretyakov Gallery and the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts. Shvartsman showed us the world of painting, demonstrating what and how by way of concrete examples. He adored the portraits of Louis Caravaque and Alexander Ivanov. We stood for hours at the portrait of a woman by Ivanov, admiring the mother-of-pearl tones of the canvas.

Mikhail Matveyevich was remarkably tactful when giving us homework assignments. Examining our drawings, he always found something positive. He would latch onto some insignificant detail and ask us

to transfer it onto the canvas. Beginning from there, he would show how the drawing is transformed in the process of work. We were happy if at least one square centimetre of this detail remained when he had finished.

5 April 2002 from the Nativity of Christ *Nikita Medvedev*

The entire experience of work in painting accumulated by mankind, the entire ordeal of manners and devices – the spontaneity of varnishing, invention and meditation, phantasmagoria and transformation and, ultimately, “death and birth” – all has a place in work on the hieratic picture.

The teacher said: “The sign is the form of the spirit, while the spirit is the content of the sign.” He explained his words using the examples of existing cultures, for culture is the thickened spirit of the people in objects of daily life, science, religion, art, etc.

Mikhail Shvartsman once said that there are four main forms of this spiritual thickening (other forms made from these ones), characterising the level of man’s relationship with God – the biological, demonic, technical and spiritual levels.

The biological level is India; the demonic level is Ancient China, Japan, Africa and America (Aztecs, Maya); the technical level is modern Europe and America; the spiritual level is the Christian world and Orthodoxy.

The form shows that the physical world itself testifies to its own spiritual health with its own self-will, just as fingerprints testify about their owner.

“The spiritual should be discussed spiritually.” I recalled these words of St Paul the Apostle many years later, when I met Mikhail Matveyevich, who told me that he had found the closest and most exact explanation of beauty in Plato, who had said: “Beauty is the metaphysical longing for past incarnations.” Mikhail Matveyevich himself said that beauty was a category of the Holy Spirit and was hierarchic. We experience its strongest sensation when we fall, in a dream or reality, into the Divine ray of the light, when we shake from head to toe at its sweet sensation. He often said to me: “Study colour and painting at the wings of the angel.”

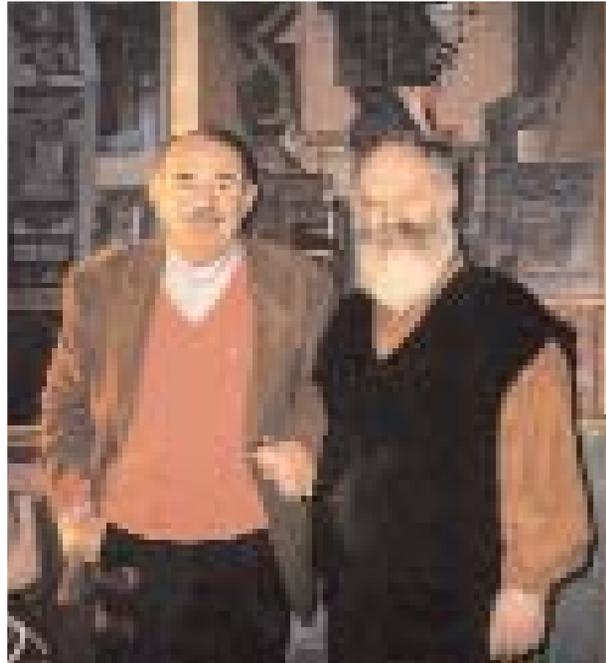
I first met Mikhail Shvartsman in 1967. Before then, I had heard so much about him. He was reputed to be a difficult man and artist, an unsociable person leading an austere lifestyle. But I saw a short, corpulent man with shining eyes and a benevolent, open, smiling, attentive, intelligent and simple-hearted face, with merry furrows in the corners of the eyes. This was how he remained all his life. I do not remember ever seeing him gloomy or downcast. He was vehement, but never in a bitter rage. His most typical feature was his deep thoughtfulness. He was a talented and extremely witty storyteller. He loved words which had, as he himself put it, “bullet accuracy” – bright, exact and capacious. He also loved high, bombastic syllables. He said that theirs was the future. He dressed with taste and was always natural.

I saw his terrible poverty in Lyubertsy and on Cable Street, but, like all real Christians, he never let anything get him down.

Our contacts and collaborations were the finest moments of my life.

14 May 2002 *Anatoly Chaschinsky*

Shvartsman always highly rated the qualities of whoever he was talking to, his guest, friend or simply acquaintance. He was not afraid to note and express this. He did not attempt to ruminate or conceal



Antonio Guerra and Mikhail Shvartsman. 5 April 1990

these feelings, so his compliments always seemed vivid, sincere and straight from the heart. Speaking figuratively, I would even say that his heart ran ahead of the intellect and, at other times, against the intellect. One consequence was his inimitable and spontaneous puns with the first names and surnames of familiar and unfamiliar people, which often led to hurt feelings – something he truly never desired and which he later regretted.

Our age difference was about thirty years, which is a whole lifetime for a youngster! This was not, however, an obstacle for him. Back then, had I been told that we would become close friends and that I would learn all that he could give me, I would have been very surprised. Several years later, though, this has become a reality for me.

He never had his own studio and rented a corner from his friend. Much later, he had the chance to use a classroom, which the school board had assigned to his student as a studio.

The whole meaning of his life lay in painting. Everything else took second place. He found it impossible to “daub canvases”, as he himself put it, in the home. He had a mystical fear of losing this opportunity. For the sake of the hieratic school, he was prepared to remain in anonymity, silence and solitude.

5 April 2002

Oleg Sapozhkov

I was told that it was very difficult to get hold of Shvartsman, that he did not like showing his works and that he could be harsh and haughty.

Like many others, I first entered Mikhail Matveyevich's house with a group of artists and art historians. We were given a simple and cordial reception. No one attempted to make out that he was a genius. While Shvartsman did not attempt to ingratiate himself upon us or to create the necessary impression; he impressed us right from the very beginning. His imposing appearance evoked an inexpressible

sympathy.

The first impression from Shvartsman's works was staggering. This was clearly a remarkable phenomenon, without direct analogies; a special and little-known world. I felt a great urge to enter this world and it seemed terrible not to understand it at all. The strange sensation arose that this was a classical section of twentieth-century art, that its creator was standing right there and that he was your contemporary.

There were different moods when planning the exhibition. Mikhail Matveyevich often asked: “Do you really think that this will be understood?” The question was not the result of snobbishness or disdain for mere mortals. In the art world, as in all others, fashion was the legislator of tastes and minds. Shvartsman had an excellent knowledge of this section of artistic culture, which he called “topical art”. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, it swamped the public arena. Mikhail Matveyevich did not lay any claim to the title of topical artist in this particular context and would probably have been horrified if this threat had hung over his hieratures. He nevertheless well understood that it was not easy to perceive his oeuvre in all its complexity and depth, on the petulant background of artistic actions.

It was finally time to see, for the first time, the labour of his entire lifetime in a museum – not in the small room of a private apartment. I cannot even begin to imagine what Mikhail Matveyevich must have felt when he came to look at the exhibition project. All his works already stood in place. He was invited to introduce the necessary corrections before the works were hung. He looked long and silently, but did not make any changes.

It is difficult to describe the inner state of the hero at the opening. One had the sensation that Mikhail Matveyevich managed to be everywhere, all at the same time. His grey head bobbed up and down in the crowd, appearing and disappearing, yet also remaining rooted to the spot.

Shvartsman subsequently came to the exhibition and stood there for hours on end. While he was, of course, interested in the reactions of the viewers, this was not the most important thing for him. For the first time, he was face to face with himself. Both the happy and the sad.

2002

Olga Yushkova

I believe that Shvartsman's art is a mystical and metaphysical revelation. For me, his pictures are something unique in the entire art of painting. They are signs of God, which remain relevant even today. I believe that in the following millennium, he will be as relevant as he was in the 1960s. I think that he will be as relevant as ever when we will no longer be here – if humanity does not destroy itself – when he will continue to shine and provide the highest spiritual delight. I do not think that a bad person will be able to find any rapport with his pictures, as a result of certain mystical features.

I regard him as my teacher. Only this is not teaching in the direct sense of the word, when you work with a teacher in his studio, under his guidance. Mikhail Shvartsman was an inspirer of ideas.

Shvartsman was unknown in St Petersburg. I later found out that this was his own principle. He did not admit chance, unfamiliar people to his studio to look at his works – unlike many nonconformist artists, who eagerly demonstrated and sold their works. Shvartsman made it a principle to not contribute to exhibitions. He possibly believed that people were still not prepared to perceive such art or perhaps he simply did not want to reveal his soul to an unprepared society (particularly in those years).

He naturally had a large influence on my works. But I was lucky in that, while deeply respecting Mikhail Matveyevich and his oeuvre,

I also drew parallels with ancient art. I therefore managed to avoid direct imitation in the subsequent years. I nevertheless regard him as my inspirer and teacher, on account of his principled approach to work and this now vanishing, crystally honest attitude towards art as a sacred action. For me, he was one of the high priests in the temple of art...

1997

Mikhail Shemyakin

Shvartsman is a Movement

The patriarch of modern painting, its classic, could not be part of any movement or trend in art. He was an entire movement in himself!

Powerful, but not tameable. He could not be adapted to anything useful, for example revolving millstones or turning turbines, so that they lit up (enlightened) dark minds.

He was wilful, profound and ungoverned by the hustle and bustle of the world. He had one Guide in life and, judging by everything that Mikhail Matveyevich did quietly and potently, they trusted one another. Up there, on the heights, they should be pleased with this collaboration.

Calm passion is the lot of a master. He does not stream between the stones, he flows...

Although dozens of the world's top museums would consider it an honour to have Shvartsman in their collection, he did not hurry to give himself up to the world in pieces.

As a whole... Perhaps Shvartsman believed that he had still not reached his peak?... Or simply could not be understood by us?

Lord, give us the intelligence to understand and appraise him!

2000 год

Yury Rost

With mathematical precision, time puts, in fitting places, not only historical events and facts, but also the creative manifestations of man.

In a recent conversation with a leading collector of Russian art, we asked ourselves which of the once persecuted and now universally famous underground artists can be considered real masters. Dmitry Krasnopenitsev, Vladimir Yakovlev, Alexander Kharitonov, Anatoly Zverev, Vladimir Nemukhin ... the list could go on and on, but our subjective approach to our artistic heritage and objective demands for a clear and cut decision made us place a full stop in this short register. The list of names was headed by Mikhail Shvartsman, the undoubted leader of Russian art life in the second half of the twentieth century.

God has given me the privilege of knowing many wonderful people. There is no greater gift than the possibility of exploring the inner world of a creator at first hand.

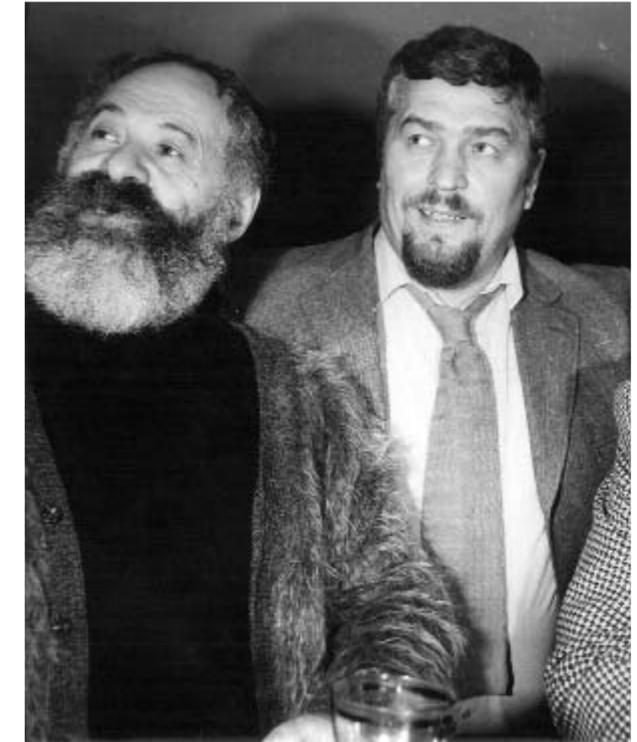
Whether they concerned the prosaic aspects of everyday life or the innermost secrets of his original oeuvre, my conversations with Misha Shvartsman remained forever etched in my memory, enriching it with the hitherto unknown depths of this talented creator.

Mikhail Shvartsman was not a member of any artistic movement. He was singular and unique in his quests, supported, by divine providence, by the experience and knowledge of all previous generations of masters.

Never descending to the level of internecine warfare or sharing his place under the sun, he was, at the same time, completely open.

I always greatly admired Mikhail Shvartsman's sincere belief in our Lord God Jesus Christ.

Being myself of a worldly and frivolous nature, I bow before his



Mikhail Shvartsman and Savely Yamschikov. 1980s

genuine orthodoxy.

Knowing Shvartsman's punctiliousness and austere approach to various elements of life, I was glad to read, in the sparse lines of his autobiography, that he considered me his friend.

10 April 2002

Savely Yamschikov

... Speaking about something and becoming involved, Mikhail Matveyevich threw his arm onto the back of a high, carved chair. There was something both imperious and pleading, as if asking for help from on high, about this sweeping gesture, as if accidentally knocking a guardian angel or taking him by the hand.

... All this overwhelmed me. I had always secretly dreamt of having a teacher or a guru. I had never met one, though, or perhaps simply did not recognise him. Shvartsman became, for me, more of a leader, going down paths which were impossible to follow.

1998

Elena Shvarts

I went to visit Shvartsman. I believe that he is the leading European post-war artist. The artist shuffles slowly about his old, two-room apartment, where virtually all his pictures stand against the walls. He wears a light blouse the same colour as his beard, as if accompanying the movements of his concealed lips. His eyes immediately light up; that is how he accepts this consolation of friendship and understanding. He often asks his wife to give him her hand. She is his joy and

support in this world. His pictures constitute a single, great cathedral of the soul. His artistic system combines the Italian gamut of Paolo Uccello and Piero della Francesca with the vertical perspective. The "steps of poetry" rise up in tandem.

19 July 1995

Antonio Guerra

I first met Mikhail Matveyevich when his name was still a legend in Moscow. Inaccessibility was also part of the legend. Few people could claim that they had seen Shvartsman's works with their own eyes or that they had even been admitted to his house. There were no such people among my friends. This was probably in 1974 or 1975.

We met at the house of Tatyana Bek, at a poetry reading by Alexander Velichansky. I was invited to read after Alexander. Mikhail Matveyevich was a most attentive listener. Poetry and, in general, the natural element of the verbal and the musical, as I would later find out, was both comprehensible and familiar to him in what I would call its essence or its message, about which Osip Mandelstam wrote: "People are saved by missives, not by quires of paper." * All this was worlds away from "aphoristic speaking", as Shvartsman said back then about the verses of one famous poet (I cannot refrain from quoting another comment by M. M., this time on Vladimir Nabokov, whom he called a "calligraphic cardiogram"; very few were able to pronounce vernacular and scholarly words as he could, almost intoxicated with the words, diving into their very heart). I would even say unusually comprehensible, because an artist is usually interested in the peripheral zones of writing and music, just as a poet rarely sees the core or magma of plastic art, which is the main business of the artist.

Stunned back then at the precision of his words and hearing, I still did not know that Shvartsman was an altogether different sort of artist (so much so that he did not even like to apply the word "artist" to himself) or that his creative and contemplative experience belonged to that field in which the birth of any living – and, as it was alive, signifying – form or form-energy was equally comprehensible, whether it was a sound or verbal form, based on the mind or events. That evening, I received an invitation. Mikhail Matveyevich said to me: "Come and see what you are expecting to see."

He was completely right. Although I would not have dared think it, from the very first sight I knew that this was what I had been expect-

ing. I would say that everyone around also expected this (without realising it). A multitude of reasons, a multitude of paths, led to what was incarnated in Shvartsman's works – both in the fate of art and in the fate of our country, and very few other places; in the positions of the stars, for example. It was necessary. Many other works – and those years were extremely productive for the Moscow underground artists – might have been and yet were not; they wanted to tear away from their time or express it, correspond to it, but Shvartsman's works saved the time. Staggeringly innovative and contradictory to everything around, the world revealed in his works was a response to an enormous expectation and the fulfilment of a hope. It is impossible to imagine anything further from arbitrariness, wilful decision, fabrication, undertakings, invented "methods" or a happily acquired "manner".

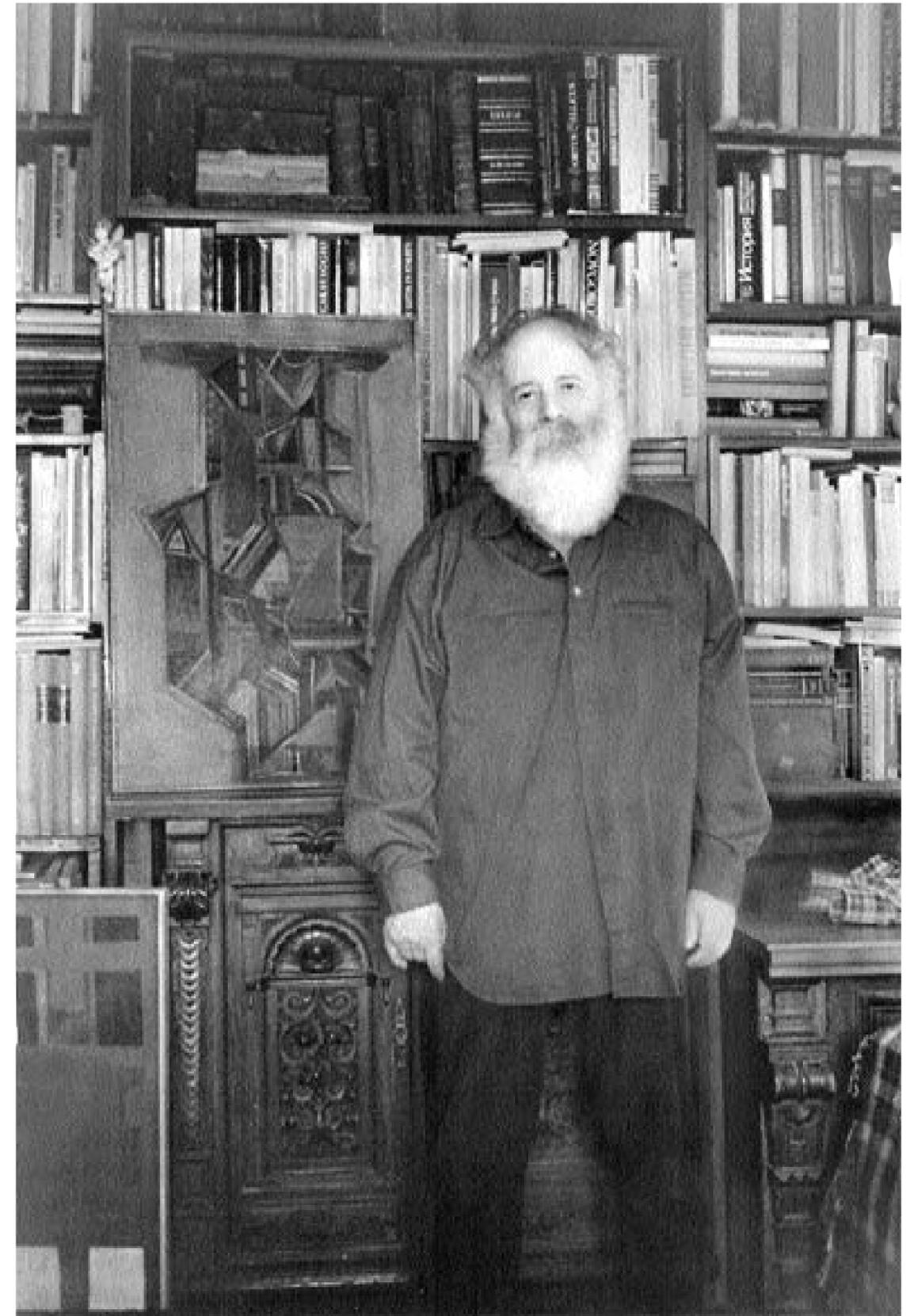
Velimir Khlebnikov, whom Mikhail Matveyevich adored, divided the world into "acquirers" and "inventors". I think that "inventor" is marginally closer to Shvartsman than "acquire", although both are fine. Shvartsman effected an enormous – by no means aesthetic – shift with the language of the avant-garde. Out of the space of activism and conquering aggression, he transferred it to the field of thanksgiving, praise and sacrifice. I am very well aware that the sceptical language of our time does not stand for such words, but in his allergy to everything "high" and "strong", it is easy to discern not a gravitation towards sobriety, but a slight panic and morbid vanity (the main thing was not to look like an enraptured idiot). Some works cannot be called anything except high, i.e. veritable. One modern French philosopher noted that the classical "oh!" is no longer encountered in modern poetry. The reason is not because it is obsolete, but simply because the author does not venture to scale the heights of this exclamation or turn of the world. He or she does not have the power to storm these heights or hold onto it. In a certain sense, this "oh!" was an adequate translation of what was uttered by Shvartsman's colour, scale and openness, the power of his forms going out to meet the vision, that great and solicitous power. A hymn or psalm; the power of human statement – the oldest, first and now forgotten form of human expression.

That "oh!" was the only thing I could say when I first saw the works of Mikhail Shvartsman.

21 January 2003

Olga Sedakova

* Quire of paper: Set of twenty-four sheets of paper of the same size and stock.



Mikhail Shvartsman at home. 1994

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

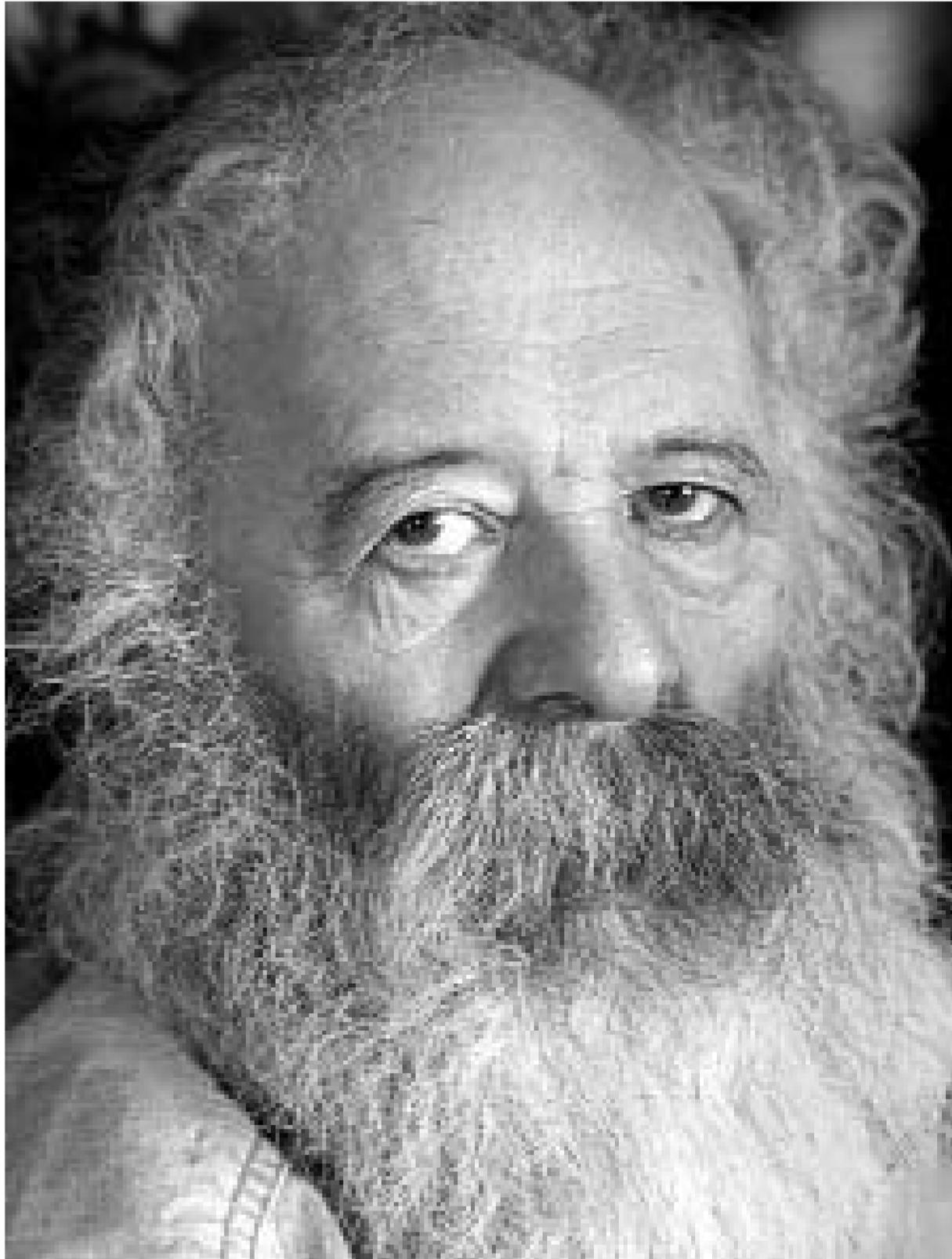
- 1967 Soviet Circus Posters, Moscow, Russia (catalogue)
1969 Exhibition of Graphic Art, Brussels, Belgium
1971 Exhibition of Graphic Art, New York, USA
Advertising and Politics, London, UK
1972 Exhibition of Graphic Art, Venice Biennale, Italy
1970–74 Union des artistes-plasticiens de l'URSS, Paris, France
1974 Exposition de l’Affiche Sovietique, Paris, France
Progressive Stromungen in Moskau, Bochum, West Germany
Exhibition of Cinema Posters, Central House of Writers, Moscow, USSR
1977 Düsseldorf, Germany/Venice Biennale, Italy
1978 Rassegna sul dissenso culturale nell'est Europeo, Bellinzona, Switzerland
La nuova arte sovietica: Una prospettiva non ufficiale, Turin, Italy
1979 20 Jahre unabhängige Kunst aus der Sowjetunion, Bochum, West Germany
1982 Exhibition of Soviet Posters, Louvre, Paris, France (catalogue)
1983 Watercolours, Drawings and Engravings, 28 Malaya Gruzinskaya Street, Moscow, USSR (catalogue)
1988 Ich lebe – Ich sehe, Berne, Switzerland (catalogue)
Basmadjan Collection, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, USSR
Basmadjan Collection, Russian Museum, Leningrad, USSR
1989 Tatiana and Natalia Kolodzei Collection, Museum of Fine Arts, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
100 Years of Russian Art (1889–1989), London/Oxford/Southampton, UK (catalogue)
1995 Der Aufstand der Bilder – Moskauer Maler 1974–1994, Hamburg, Germany
1995–96 Die Farbe der Zeit/Zwölf zeitgenössische russische Künstler, Querfurth/Salzgitter/Lüneburg, Germany (catalogue)
1996 Nonconformists: The Second Russian Avant-Garde (1955–88), Germany
1996–97 Between Faith and Aesthetics: Fifteen Contemporary Russian Artists, Hamburg, Germany
2002 Manege: Forty Years of Nonconformist Art, Moscow, Russia
2003–2004 Portrait of the Artist in an Interior, Moscow, Russia (catalogue)
2004 Pantheon of the Russian Underground, Moscow, Russia
Art Cologne, New Art, Cologne, Germany

ONE-MAN SHOWS

- 1994 Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia (catalogue)
1997 Naschokin House, Moscow, Russia (catalogue)
2001 Russian Museum, St Petersburg, Russia (catalogue)

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Mikhail Shvartsman. 1997