

## Leonid Shishkin and the market for Socialist Realism

In late 1980s Leonid Shishkin (below), then a journalist, considered a range of commercial projects. His final choice fell on the art world as he had passion for art as well as the right connections, which he had managed to establish while working for *Soviet Union* magazine: he organised a selling exhibition of contemporary Soviet artists in Prague in 1987. In 1989 the Italian art dealer Marco Dadrino, who at that time was involved in the acquisition and export of antiques from Moscow, bought several sketches from Shishkin by Soviet artists of the 1940s and 1950s and arranged to purchase another 200 to 300 paintings, which he showed in his castle in the Piedmont countryside.

Over the following four years Shishkin was to arrange the acquisition of Socialist Realist works from across the whole country. European art dealers came to his gallery on Begovaya—not open to the public—sometimes buying 200 works at a time. Shishkin's gallery worked as a wholesaler, supplying buyers who sold on to art galleries all over the world. According to Shishkin's estimates, at that time the turnover for 19th-century or

older Russian art was much lower than for Socialist Realist art, which was in constant demand overseas. However, by 1993 the European market was saturated, so Shishkin changed tack. In 1994 he organised

his first open exhibition and diplomats and foreign journalists became his main clientele. In 1995 the gallery moved to Neglinnaya Street and became a regular participant in the art and antiques salons at the Central House of the Artist and actively exhibited its artists.

The Russian financial crisis of 1998 reduced his steady clientele so Shishkin began to deal in 19th-century Russian masters and conduct his own auctions.

The art market slowly recovered and Shishkin's gallery welcomed more and more Russian-speaking clients. From 2004 onwards it held monthly auctions while retaining its status as the main place to buy Socialist Realist art. In 2010 Shishkin transferred his business to the recently renovated epitome of Socialist Realist architecture, the hotel Ukraine, and at the same time opened a gallery in Weybridge, outside London. S.S.

