

Article

Female Collectors for Exhibition History of Non-Conformist Art in France: Marie-Thérèse Cochin Gallery Case

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Abstract: The role of female collectors in the promotion of non-official Soviet art is rarely reflected in texts on the history of art. In the shadow of the well-known figures, their patronage stays obscure. This article proposes to reflect on the exhibition practice of the Marie-Thérèse first Gallery in order to add to art history by rethinking the context with a gendered lens.

Keywords: non-conformist art; art exhibition; France–USSR; women/female patrons; victimization in art

Before describing women's participation in non-conformist art exhibition organization in France, it is important to lay out the very special context of the 1970–80 period. At this time in France, there were many Russian immigrant communities, such as Fontenay-aux-Roses revolving around Siniavski, or The Montgeron museum community, revolving around Alexander Glezer, who emigrated right after the 1974 Bulldozer show¹. This also includes the communities around magazines, such as editors and writers of trilingual A-YA journal around Igor Chelkovski and the magazine Apollo 77, produced in Paris by the artist Mikhail Chemiakin and the poet Constantin Kuzminsky. Both became important outlets for underground artists. All those agents working to promote soviet non-official art were in permanent conflict. We can mention, among others, the exhibition of non-conformist art in Palais des Congrès at Porte Maillot in Paris (run by Chemiakin and Gleser in 1976), which became a matter of dispute among the emigrated artists. Chuikov said about this exhibition that “it's a pity. Everything that reach the West is so retarded. A kind of prop, that you do not need” (Shelkovskii 2019) in his letter to Shelkovskii. In the same venue, Shelkovskii responds to Chuikov that he agrees and that there is a “low level of intelligence in all of this” (Shelkovskii 2019). Later in 1979, “the battleground lay between the Montgeron Museum of Russian Art in Exile (run by Glezer) and the Union of Russian Artists (directed by the artist of Russian descent Monique Vivien-Brantôme). The Union's spokesman was the handsome Moscovite Victor Kullback. He was the main organizer of the Union's exhibition “Les Russes à Paris” at the prestigious Galerie Bellint, much to the fury of the montgeronnais. The opening was held on 17 April 1979. The guests clinked their plastic glasses full of champagne and enthusiastically discussed the masterpieces on the walls. Suddenly, in the doorway, there appeared the figure of the uninvited Glezer. In one hand, he held a gun, in the other—a whip. He took aim at Kullback, but fortunately, the gun misfired. The police were called, and Glezer was dragged towards the exit, but he gave them the slip and managed to sink his teeth into Kullback's leg, tearing his trouser leg. Everyone fled the gallery. Only the old artist Grigori (Grégoire) Mishonts, a contemporary of Marc Chagall, beamed with joy. “Everything is just like the old days: Breton, the Surrealists, the hooligans and busted noses!” he declared” (Sapgir 2012).

The period of 1970–1980 was particularly fruitful and politically engaged years for exhibiting non-conformist art. Beginning from the Musée de Grenoble exhibition of 1974 by Maurice Besset or the Bochum Exhibition of 1974 organized by Arsen Pohribny, Soviet non-official art became an important part of the western exhibition discourse. Centre Pompidou's ‘Paris-Moscou’ major show took place in 1978, right after Venice Dissent



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Exhibition. This Biennale of 1977 by Enrico Crispolti and Gabriela Moncada was one of the first shows organized in close collaboration with a female commissioner. With no participation of Glezer because: “this exhibition would be of a highest quality, instead of those run by Glezer-Chemiakin” (Shelkovskii 2019).

One can state that the role of female collectors in French non-conformist exhibition history stays fragmented and unwritten. A famous French art collector Dina Verney, an owner of a Paris art gallery where she exhibited contemporary western artists, is rarely evoked in the Anglo-American bibliography on the subject. Indeed, after her journey to the Soviet Union in the 1970s, the works of non-conformist artists became an important part of her personal collection and of the exhibition history of her gallery. The very contribution of Veronique Schiltz, an art historian, for the *Eight Moscow painters*, Musée de Grenoble venue of 1974, is unmentioned in any publication, including the exhibition catalogue (Besset 1974). The aid of Galina Mahrova (1998) in promoting and collecting non-official pieces is inappropriately documented in the exhibition history of non-conformist Soviet art. Moreover, one of the less explored is the role of Marie-Thérèse Cochin and her two Paris galleries in the support and promotion of Soviet artists abroad. In the shadow of her husband and art director Alexander Glezer, her activity stays rarely evoked by art historians of this period. In this article, I try to analyze the exhibition activity of her first art gallery in Paris. I had a chance to interview Madame Cochin, and I try to tell her story to pay attention to this original and fair journey of the young woman in search of emancipation.

Marie-Thérèse Cochin de Foras was a young woman, with an important art history background from the Genève University. She became interested in Soviet non-conformist art early on before entering her studies. Her grandfather was in Soviet Russia and instilled in young Marie-Therese the love for it. She originated from a famous and very old Parisian Cochin de Foras surviving family of the French nobility. Coming from the Parisian bourgeoisie, they became noble in 1748 through the ennobling function of council members of Paris. The founders of the hospice went on to become the Hospital Cochin in the same district as the Marie-Therese gallery. Those financial means allowed her to act as a patron of Soviet Russian non-official art, even if her family was hostile to her activity as a gallery owner presenting Soviet artists, which could influence the image of the wealthy Cochin family. The Marie-Thérèse patronage was possible due to her meeting with Alexander Glezer shortly after the opening of the Montgeron museum of Russian Art in Exile in 1976. This figure heavily influenced the Marie-Therese gallery journey and so should be better addressed. One of the leading figures in Moscow’s artistic resistance that was organized in the 1960s, Alexander Glezer supported post-war Russian contemporary art and organized the Bulldozer open-air exhibition in Moscow in 1974. Born in Baku in 1934, Alexander Glezer was a poet, a friend of Soviet artists, an organizer of exhibitions, and played an important part in the promotion of Russian culture abroad (from 1976 in France and from the 1990s in the USA). However, a lot of his French exhibitions and printing projects became possible due to large support from Marie-Therese Cochin. Starting from gallery projects, which are the heart of this article, including magazine Streletz patronage, Montgeron collection logistics, etc.

The first gallery, “Galerie Marie-Thérèse”, opened its doors in 1984 and was running for 4 years. The gallery had an address at a firm location on 73 Quai de la Tournelle in Paris, the building owned by the Cochin family. The gallerist explained that her family was against the dissident character of these artists and worried about the use of the Cochin or De Foras name in association with such persons. After four years of work, Marie-Thérèse decided to take back her independence and break away from the first gallery structure and come out in support of the non-conformist community, changing the gallery’s name to “Galerie Marie-Thérèse Cochin”. In the heart of Parisian non-conformist life, Marie-Thérèse was supported by Veronique Schiltz, godmother of one of her children, and Olga Mahrov, daughter of Galina Mahrov, a sponsor for artists, author of the monography about life and art practice of the dissident artists in USSR and France.

The gallerist was uncertain of the direction the gallery should move in, as the shadow of Alexander Glezer seemed to influence and even impose on some artists. He called the Marie-Thérèse Gallery an annex of Mongeron's museum. In the opening article for the gallery in *Fine Art Magazine*, Anatoli Kopeikin said: "The undoubted merit of the gallery is that it has established contacts with prominent Russian artists, and with the Montgeron Museum of Contemporary Russian Art, whose director Alexander Glezer helped Marie-Thérèse de Foras select paintings for the first exhibition" (Kopeikin 1984).

The role of Alexander Glezer in the search and representation of different artists is undeniable. There were a couple of articles trying to understand the relationships between Marie-Thérèse and Alexander. An article devoted to the work and life of Alexander Glezer said that: "In 1984, the Marie-Thérèse de Foras Gallery opened in Paris, where A.D. Glezer also held the position of Artistic Director. In 1988, the collection of the Montgeron Museum moved to Paris, to the Galerie Marie-Thérèse de Foras, where it remained until 1992" (Sapgir 2016). One of the attempts to understand his influence was made by Kira Sapgir in the article "March of the Enthusiasts. In memory of Alexander Glezer". She said that: "Actually, A. Glezer was a heartthrob in life. He, by his own admission, had "eight and a half wives" (since he married one of them twice ...). Among them was Marie-Thérèse Cochin, from an old famous family of French politicians, historians and doctors, whose name was gracing one of the largest Parisian hospitals. What attracted women to this man of small stature, and an appearance that did not stand out in terms of beauty? He seduced them with fiery poems, passionate courtship—in short, enthusiasm!" (Sapgir 2016). The same year, we found Ksenya Krivosheina's article where she repeated the same thing: "A. Glezer, despite his unsightly appearance and bad temper, married the sweetest and richest aristocrat, Marie-Thérèse Cochin, who gave birth to a daughter from him. M.-T. opened a large gallery of modern art near the famous Centre Pompidou. [...] However, it did not take long before it became known that Glezer once again played the runaway and drove away from Paris in an unknown direction. Marie-Thérèse refused to exhibit his "collection", soon Glezer appeared in the USA, and in 1994, he came back to Russia ... A trail of scandals and "showdowns" stretched behind him there, but I admit that he was a talented entrepreneur, with a sense of urgency and demand, and, for sure, did a lot for the artists of that time. So let's not pick the bone with the poet, journalist, collector and publisher who wrote a bright page in the history of Russian emigration to Paris" (Krivosheina 2017).

Marie-Thérèse gallery made a choice to distance her name from the emigrants, dissidents, and unofficial and non-conformist artists by saying instead that her gallery represented Independent Russian art as opposed to Non-conformist. A journalist explains this choice in an article in *Fine Art Magazine* "Streletz" (directed by Marie Cochin and redacted by Alexander Glezer), "The opening of this gallery was prepared by the entire quarter-century course on the development of Russian art both inside and outside of Russia. The owner of the gallery, Marie-Thérèse de Foras, intended to represent Russian independent art to the Western art community" (Kopeikin 1984), he continues to explain. "These last few years have given a special meaning to the concept of independence in art. In essence, independence is an essential quality of any art: the opposition of "official" (salon) and "independent" has been around for a couple hundred of years, starting with the famous debates between "romantics" and "classicists" in France and everywhere in Europe." (Kopeikin 1984), using the classic comparison technique of the west eastern topology discourse. To summarize "the independence of the artist became a political act only with the beginning of the perestroika" (Kopeikin 1984).

The collaboration activity between Alexander Glezer and Marie-Thérèse was fruitful for non-conformist art and for Glezer's image and fame. Starting from the art directorship for the Marie-Thérèse Gallery, using its storage capacity later to conserve the Montgeron collection. Alexander engaged Marie-Thérèse in his cultural magazine publication "Streletz". "At the end of each year, I didn't know where the money would come from for the next issue. No sooner had the magazine been born that it happened upon its first struggle. I

suggested to the publishing house “Russika” that they finance the publication and take reigns of the entire circulation. They agreed, but two or three months before the release of the first issue they went back on the agreement. A catastrophic situation. I already thought that I would have to sell the paintings—after all, the release of “Streletz” was publicly announced. However, fortunately, it did not have to come to that, as there was another patron, Marie-Thérèse Cochin, who lent money to the magazine for the first year, and after that everything was absolutely incredible” (Glezer 1989).

In four years, up until September 1987, there were 28, as well as a couple of outside events that have promoted and brought light to many artists, but especially Rabin, Nemoukhin, and Pinchevsky. With the steady pace of 5–7 exhibitions a year, Marie-Thérèse chose to name those venues using the artists’ origins (“Moscow–New York–Paris” of March 1984, or “Paris–Moscow–Leningrad–New York” of February 1985), directly the names of artists (personal exhibitions of Rabin or Sissoev, etc.), and by using the number of exhibitors (“Eight Russian Artists” in November 1984, or “Five Russian Artists in Paris on July 1985).

The very first exhibition was held at the gallery in March 1984. It brought together three painters: Vladimir Nemoukhin, Leonid Pinchevsky, and Oscar Rabin. Artists’ residencies were as follows: Moscow, New York, Paris. Marie-Thérèse’s favorites, according to her words, were two of them: Rabin and Nemoukhin. The origins of Pinchevsky’s appearance were at Glezer’s suggestion. *Herald Tribune* (1984) made an announcement for the opening of the exhibition, and by extension the gallery, on 11 March 1984 or *Le Figaro* 31 March 1984 both spoke about independent Russian art. Madame Cochin considered in an individual interview that the public of the gallery did not like Oscar Rabin’s work, considering it dark and empty. The opinion was shared in 1974 by the correspondent of *Le Monde*, who came to the exhibition of the *Eight Moscow painters* in Grenoble (Fermigier 1974).

For the article in *Russian Thought*, Alexander Glezer puts a photograph of Oscar Rabin next to Marie-Thérèse, who was tasting bread with salt (Figure S1). The legend explains that the mistress of the De Foras gallery was very pleased with this Old Russian custom (Glezer 1984b). As if it is not her who invites people into her gallery, but the Russian world of immigrants that agreed to enlighten her with these customs and their history. Was Madame made to feel like a guest on her own premises?

The article in the introduction talks about the clash of two personalities. Alexander Glezer congratulated the opening of a gallery dedicated to independent Russian art. To support these congratulatory statements, he said that the gallery was “opened by a foreigner, a Frenchwoman, an art historian” (Glezer 1984b). He estimated the number of invitations sent out for the opening of the gallery to be 300, in opposition to the 200 invitees, the audience that he was barely able to build up during a whole year of the Montgeron museum’s existence.

The western press announced (*Le Figaro* 1984a) the Nemoukhin, Rabin, and Pinchevsky exhibition as “independent Russian art”. One could ask why there was not any differentiation between nations. Why Russian and not Soviet? The so-called title nation absorbed all the identities under the “Saint Russian” element. On the other side, Russian Immigrants Press proposed a reflection on this opening related to politics. In an article “Paris New York”, Glezer implied that Marie-Thérèse Gallery was criticized by many because of the “economic situation”, he, as the article’s author, introduced different reactions to this supposition.² Marie-Thérèse said: “I think that for real art there is no “special” time (except for the war times). The real art will win no matter what’s happening around. There was somebody who said that I would waste my money, that the gallery would not work. Firstly: without a risk, there’s no reward. Secondly, I’m an optimist and believe that good will prevail.” Then, there was also the artist Dlugii who praised the opening of a serious new gallery, and Rabin, who said that he was very grateful to represent Paris among the exhibited artists.

The accent on the “independent” art chosen by the owner at the beginning of the gallery’s story rapidly became an accent on the exile and saint martyrdom of the artists presented. April 1984 was the time when Pinchevsky’s solo exhibition opened its doors.

“A non-conformist artist, in exile from 1982 in New York” and his luminous houses. Two remarks with an important charge for a foreigner: exile and resistant ([Les nouvelles littéraires 1984](#); [Journal de l’amateur d’art 1984](#)). “L’amateur d’art Journal” of April 1984 wrote on Pinchevsky’s exhibition in Marie-Thérèse gallery. Starting from the very choice of non-conformist art, the journal argues that “This kind of art can survive only in exile”. In addition, the author of the article with full certainty cited Alexander Glezer as a Montgeron museum creator, citing the artist’s “sensitive language of the lost home” ([Glezer 1984a](#)). Just like he said in another article, “A conversation with Leonid Pinchevsky”: “... for me, the work of art is valuable if it’s spiritual” ([Glezer 1984a](#)). Interview taken by Alexander Glezer, where he explained the friendship he shared with the artist and a very special fantasy and spiritual value of his work. Pinchevsky argued that even if Marie-Thérèse gallery is a young exhibition space, and “maybe it would be better to wait for another, more important gallery to open” ([Glezer 1984a](#)), he accepted to exhibit there because he liked the idealist spirit of the owner, a French woman who understood Russian art. He explained that he met Marie-Thérèse twice, first in the Montgeron museum and later in New York, to choose the works to put in the exhibit. Moreover, in the middle of the interview, he reflected on the way of creating works in Western and Soviet cultures in an interesting manner. “There are two extremes: on one side, there is a stillborn official red-tape socialist realism, art without a soul, emasculated, spiritless; on the other—avant-garde wardrobe, and it’s just as spiritless” ([Le Figaro 1984a, 1984b](#)). The only spirited, blessed, martyr guards of art are the non-conformist artists. We see that non-conformist artists were under Soviet Union’s extreme anti-western propaganda, branded as having “no soul, being inhuman, outrageous”. Pinchevsky said that he was sure that “what was happening now in contemporary art was a sign of a return of figurative traditional painting, and the return of the representation of the image of God in art”.

To continue exploring the theme of exile and martyrdom of the artists presented in the gallery we can explore the press reaction to the next exhibition venues of the Gallery. The May 1984 exhibition was announced in “Amateur d’art” in May 1984 and “L’œil” in the same month, with two articles. The first article announced the Oscar Rabin exhibition in June 1984 and presented him as the leader of independent Russian art and the symbol of the “lost Russia”. The article’s authors compare Rabin’s painting to cubism ([L’œil 1984](#)), to Rouault ([Journal de l’amateur d’art 1984](#)), or to expressionism ([de Chikoff 1984](#)). Later on, in the November December exhibition of the Sissoev, whom “gulag appurtenance” is accentuated by Irina de Chikoff, ([Figaro 12 November 1984](#)) author of the article “Un artiste au gulag” ([La Croix 1984](#)). In addition, it was called “out of KGB taste” ([Davidov 1987](#)) by “La Croix”.

The article ([Davidov 1987](#)) tells about the last exhibition that took place at the Marie-Thérèse Gallery in September 1987, ten years after the famous exhibition of the “Bulldozers”. Next to the gallery on Rue Oudinot in Paris, Marie-Thérèse organized a tribute consisting of 16 artists and 64 works. The author of the article talks about the exhibition that lasted 4 h, which refers to the actual duration of the Bulldozers and occurs in the open air. A performance rather than an opening has gathered at least 200 people, according to the journalist. The first four years step of the Marie-Thérèse Gallery ended with the reminiscence, an homage to the last exhibition organized by Glezer in USSR, just before his exile.

Glezer influenced every part of the work of the Marie-Thérèse first Gallery, but at the same time, the patronage of this woman made possible a different kind of promotion for the non-conformist artists, more subtle and less engaged in politics and dissident culture. She tried to avoid the political issue of her husband and exhibit aesthetically interesting artists, instead of Glezer, who laid all the emphasis on the political rather than the aesthetic aspects of this dissident work, which obscured its artistic value in the eyes of a Western audience and slowed its progress in the global art market. When Rabin, stripped of his Soviet citizenship in 1977, arrived in Paris, he became anxious about the situation and protested the labels attached to the art. The very first attempt to build an emancipated

gallery supporting Russian independent art became a kind of image “trained” by Marie-Therese’s husband. That is why right after the final Marie Therese gallery exhibition in 1987, she decided to open up a new, different gallery, this time named Marie-Therese Cochin, in order to detach herself from Alexander Glezer.

List of Exhibitions of Marie-Thérèse Gallery

1. “Moscow-New York-Paris”, March 1984, artists presented: Vladimir Nemoukhin, Leonid Pinchevsky, and Oscar Rabin
2. “Leonid Pinchevsky”, April 1984, artists presented: Leonid Pinchevsky
3. “Oscar Rabin”, May 1984, artists presented: Oscar Rabin
4. “Seven Russian Artists”, June 1984, artists presented: Mihail Chemiakin, Vladimir Nemoukhin, Alexander Rabin, Valentina Kropivnitskaya, Oscar Rabin, Valentina Shapiro, Vladimir Titov
5. “Eight Russian Artists”, September 1984, artists presented: Mihail Chemiakin, Vladimir Nemoukhin, Alexander Rabin, Valentina Kropivnitskaya, Oscar Rabin, Viatcheslav Saveliev, Vladimir Titov, Natalia Yakunina
6. “Viatcheslav Sissoev”, November 1984, artists presented: Viatcheslav Sissoev
7. “Alexander Rabin”, November 1984, artists presented: Alexander Rabin
8. “Paris-Moscow-Leningrad-New York”, February 1985, artists presented: Mihail Chemiakin, Vladimir Nemoukhin, Alexander Rabin, Valentina Kropivnitskaya, Leonid Pinchevsky, Leonid Lermann, Vladimir Ovchinikov, Vladimir Piatnitsky, Oscar Rabin
9. “Volodia Grigorovitch”, February 1985, artists presented: Volodia Grigorovitch
10. “Vitaly Dlugy”, May 1985, artists presented: Vitaly Dlugy
11. “Eight Russian Artists”, May 1985, artists presented: Valentina Shapiro, Vladimir Nemoukhin, Alexander Rabin, Valentina Kropivnitskaya, Oscar Rabin, Volodia Grigorovitch, Serge Hollerbach, Vitaly Dlugy
12. “Five Russian artists in Paris”, July 1985, artists presented: Mihail Chemiakin, Vitaly Dlugy, Volodia Grigorovitch, Marina Popova, Oscar Rabin
13. “Valentina Kropivnitskaya”, September 1985, artists presented: Valentina Kropivnitskaya
14. “Anatole Pasternak”, October 1985, artists presented: Anatole Pasternak
15. “Serge Hollerbach”, January 1986, artists presented: Serge Hollerbach
16. “Three Russian Painters”, February 1986, artists presented: Oscar Rabin, Serge Hollerbach, Vladimir Ovchinikov
17. “Vladimir Ovchinikov”, February 1986, artists presented: Vladimir Ovchinikov
18. “Viacheslav Saveliev”, April 1986, artists presented: Viacheslav Saveliev
19. “Alexander Putov”, May 1986, artists presented: Alexander Putov
20. “Alexander Sokolov”, June 1986, artists presented: Alexander Sokolov
21. “Contemporary Russian painters choice”, October 1986, artists presented: Oscar Rabin, Serge Hollerbach, Vitaly Dlugy, Irina Plotiszina, Valentina Kropivnitskaya
22. “Art Cloche”, October 1986, German international salon
23. “Christine Zeytonnian-Belous”, June 1986, artists presented: Christine Zeytonnian-Belous
24. “Mihail Chemiakin. Seven years after”, November 1986, artists presented: Mihail Chemiakin
25. “Mihail Chemiakin”, December 1986, artists presented: Mihail Chemiakin
26. “Valentina Shapiro”, June 1987, artists presented: Valentina Shapiro
27. “Christine Zeytonnian-Belous”, June 1987, artists presented: Christine Zeytonnian-Belous
28. Bulldozer Hommage, September 1987, artists presented: Oscar Rabin, Serge Hollerbach, Vitaly Dlugy, Valentina Kropivnitskaya

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: <https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/arts11050081/s1>, Figure S1: Photography of Marie-Thérèse Cochin during the gallery opening in 1984, from Streletz Art Magazine, НОВАЯ РУССКАЯ ГАЛЕРЕЯ В ПАРИЖЕ, p.43, Anatoli Kopeikin, https://vtoraya-literatura.com/pdf/strelets_1984_04__ocr.pdf (accessed on 10 August 2022).

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Notes

- ¹ The Bulldozer Exhibition (Russian: Бульдóзерная выставка) was an unofficial art exhibition in Belyayevo, Moscow, by non-official artists on 15 September 1974. The exhibition was forcefully broken up by a large police force that included bulldozers and water cannons, hence the name. Alexander Glezer, an enthusiast for underground art, started a museum in Montgeron near Paris and named it the Museum of Russian Art in Exile, with a transatlantic branch in New Jersey. Subsequently, the entire collection was bought by US professor Norton Dodge and later became part of the collection of the Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University.
- ² In 1989, Marie-Thérèse Cochin gallery participated in the Paris art salon CNIT-Defense for a week on December. The total amount of sales represents FRF 212,000 generated by one oil Rabin's paintings, Chemiakin and Kabakov drawings, and a couple of works from Kalinin, Yankilevskii, Pinchevsky, Vladimirov, and Nemoukhin.

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