

Oleg Vassiliev, *Anniversary*  
*Composition*, 1983. Collage, black  
and white paper, 21¼ x 20½ in.

# The Journey of Oleg Vassiliev

BY NATALIA KOLODZEI

## Biographical Note

Oleg Vassiliev was born in Moscow in 1931; relocated to New York in 1990; and moved to Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2006, where he passed away in 2013. Vassiliev studied at the Moscow Art School and graduated from the V. I. Surikov State Art Institute in Moscow, specializing in graphics and printmaking. From the 1950s to the mid-1980s, he earned a living as a book illustrator, as was common for a number of Muscovite nonconformist artists, including Ilya Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, and Victor Pivovarov. This occupation allowed them to experiment with formal techniques, as well as to work on their own art. In the late 1950s Vassiliev and some of his friends discovered and were inspired by works of the generation of avant-garde



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К 50-летию со дня рождения

artists such as Vladimir Favorsky (1886–1964), Robert Falk (1886–1958), and Arthur Fonvizin (1882–1973)—known as the “three F’s—Formalists.”

Today, Vassiliev is a widely recognized artist; he was the recipient of numerous artistic awards, including

two grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation (in 1994 and 2002). His works have been displayed in museum exhibitions across the globe, including *Russia!* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in 2005. In 2004–5, the Kolodzei Art Foundation organized two large solo exhibitions of Vassiliev’s works, in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow and the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, and edited the monograph *Oleg Vassiliev: Memory Speaks (Themes and Variations)*. Vassiliev’s prominent solo

exhibitions at U.S. museums include *The Art of Oleg Vassiliev* at The Museum of Russian Art, Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 2011, and *Oleg Vassiliev: Space and Light* at the Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, New Jersey, in 2014–15.



Above: Oleg Vassiliev, 4, 6, 8, from the *Metro Series*, 1961–62. Linocut, edition 15. All images in this essay courtesy of the Kolodzei Collection of Russian and Eastern European Art, Kolodzei Art Foundation, [www.KolodzeiArt.org](http://www.KolodzeiArt.org).

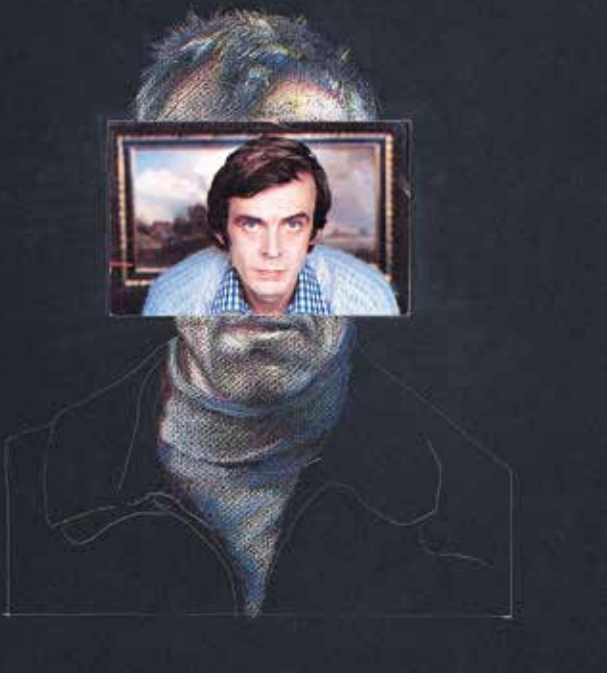
**A**n important and fascinating feature in Oleg Vassiliev's art is the profound intimacy in his work, where personal memories have universal appeal. The division between personal and political, between private and public, had been ideologized in Soviet Russia. Vassiliev eschews ideology to capture very personal memories of art and life. As is the case with many artists who had left their homeland for the West, Vassiliev had to confront questions of identity and authenticity. Despite Vassiliev's move to New York in 1990, his art never lost its connection to Russia. As his fellow artist Erik Bulatov writes in the book *Oleg Vassiliev: Memory Speaks (Themes and Variations)*, "Oleg Vassiliev is the most Russian of the Russian artists living today, because he expresses not just one particular quality of Russian art, but its essence, its very core from which the various qualities of Russian art spring forth."<sup>1</sup>

The notion of the Russian-American or American-Russian artist has been problematic for both cultures. Vassiliev enjoyed living in two major metropolises—the cultural capitals of Moscow and New York. In New York, he did not make any noticeable attempts to assimilate into his American environment. He was comfortable, however, in the company of artists like his old friend Ilya Kabakov, as well as Grisha Bruskin, Leonid Sokov, Vitaly Komar, and Alexander Melamid; and he found a new audience of collectors for his work. In the 1990s, politics and history reentered some of his paintings as he began to rethink Russian history in the aftermath of the Soviet collapse and his own departure. It is as if Vassiliev needed the distance of exile to contemplate his history and memories. In some of the works created in America, Vassiliev used English—the most global of languages—to indicate a bridge between the cultures.

Vassiliev's principal themes, which emerged while he was in Russia and engaged him throughout his life, are his memories of home and houses, roads, forests, fields, friends, and family. Vassiliev always starts his creative process from a very personal memory, from his sacred space—the safeguarded inner center—and connects it to the visual image. He masterfully incorporates elements from different times and spaces and arranges them throughout his paintings according to the logic and "energetic" space of the painting. On a formal level, Vassiliev combines the tradition of Russian realist and landscape painting—exemplified by such artists as Isaac Levitan (1860–1940)—and the traditions of the Russian avant-garde of the 1910s and 1920s, as he creates on canvas and paper visual images and impressions, memories and recollections. Capturing the intangible memory with a realistic depiction of the subjective world is one of the goals of Vassiliev's work.

One of Vassiliev's first mature paintings, *House on the Island Anzer*, dates from 1965. In 1968, he had his first solo exhibition at Café Bluebird in Moscow, where a number of Russian nonconformist artists, including Komar and Melamid, Kabakov, Bulatov, and Pyotr Belenok also had their first semiofficial shows. Vassiliev was in constant dialogue with his close friends Kabakov and Bulatov, each of whom plays an important role in Russian culture. All three spent most of their artistic career in Moscow before moving abroad and were later welcomed back in Russia with accolades and major retrospectives.

Oleg Vassiliev belongs to the generation of Soviet nonconformist artists that emerged during the post-Stalin "Thaw" of the 1950s, championing an alternative to Socialist Realism. Nonconformist artists did not share a single aesthetic or unifying theme. In general, they tend to be unhappy with the terms "nonconformist" and "second



Oleg Vassiliev, *Self-Portrait with Taratorkin*, 1981. Wax pastel, collage on paper, 21 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 20 $\frac{3}{4}$  in.

avant-garde” nowadays. In their view, a vast difference exists between the first, politically committed generation, and the second, apolitical one. Most seek simply to find their own individual place within the international art scene. Vassiliev always pursued his personal artistic vision. In the mid-1950s, an atmosphere of spiritual awakening and new hope for freedom in the arts appeared. Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin in his “secret speech” in 1956; the return of political prisoners, including such important artists as Boris Sveshnikov; and the easing of aesthetic restraints during the Thaw provided an environment that encouraged artistic creativity. In addition, major exhibitions of Western art (including works by Pablo Picasso, Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, and Henri Matisse) came to Russia. In 1957, the Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow held an exhibition that incorporated many contemporary trends in Europe and the United States, while in 1959 the National American Exhibition introduced the Soviet public for the first time to works by such artists as Mark Rothko and Jackson Pollock. These factors all contributed to a flourishing of abstract and nonfigurative works in nonconformist art.

The *Manezh* exhibition and the renewal of censorship in 1962 were followed by the overthrow of Khrushchev and his replacement by Leonid Brezhnev. In the following decade of the 1970s, Soviet nonconformist artists sought to make the world aware of Soviet censorship and harassment. The breakthrough *Bulldozer* show (1974), followed by a

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—Oleg Vassiliev, “On Memory”

second open-air exhibition and many apartment exhibitions in Moscow and Leningrad, served to reignite hope. But a renewed ideological onslaught from the Brezhnev regime squelched that hope. The deportation of the writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the internal exile of physicist Andrei Sakharov were among the most infamous examples of the harassment to which creative people were subjected. This unexpected crackdown led not only to an incalculable loss of artistic talent but also to a stifling period of stagnation and conservatism in politics and society.

Like many other nonconformist artists, Vassiliev escaped the ideological confines of the Soviet system, not by confronting that system directly, but by exploring spiritual dimensions within the self. Vassiliev never considered himself a political artist; his main purpose in art was to capture his impression of the world, as well as to comment on the relationship linking the viewer, the artist, and the painting. In fact, he believed in the incompatibility of art and politics. But even his desire to eschew politics in his work did not stop him from being criticized by Soviet authorities. “Officially . . . I found myself in the circle of ‘unofficial’ artists, winding up in the pages of the magazine *A-YA* in Paris,<sup>2</sup> and afterwards being criticized at the MOSKh [the Moscow branch of the official Union of Artists] by ‘The Troika’ [composed of the director of the Surikov Art Institute, the Communist Party, and the Union of Artists’ leaders],” he recalls in his piece, “How I Became an Artist.”<sup>3</sup>

Vassiliev’s landscape is a combination of the Russian landscape and contemporary means of expression. As Levitan became the major interpreter of the Russian landscape in art at the close of the nineteenth century, Vassiliev continued this tradition into the twenty-first century. Vassiliev explores and expands the concept of landscape as emotion, while reminding the viewer about the process and construction of painting.

Like Levitan, Vassiliev can render the true beauty of nature in all the diversity of its changing states, and at the





## *Oleg Vassiliev: Metro Series and Selected Works on Paper*

In 2017, the exhibition *Oleg Vassiliev: Metro Series and Selected Works on Paper* from the Kolodzei Art Foundation was on display at the Harriman Institute, featuring linocuts from the late 1950s and early 1960s and selected drawings and collages. Most of the prints produced in the Soviet Union from the 1950s to the 1970s were created by the artists themselves in small editions due both to the absence of an art market and limited access to materials. For example, the Experimental Lithography Studio was accessible during Soviet times only to members of the official Union of Artists. Lithographic stones were numbered and inspected from time to time by state officials, making it very difficult for nonmembers of the Union to gain access to materials. Despite these difficulties artists persisted, however, creating prints and experimenting with varieties of styles and techniques. In his linocut series *Metro* (1961–62) one can trace the ideas of Vladimir Favorsky, whose studio Vassiliev visited in the late 1950s. Favorsky—an engraver, draughtsman, and theorist who reintroduced woodcuts into book printing—was a key figure in the history of Soviet xylography after the 1920s. He was a teacher to a whole constellation of fine masters and promoted innovations in graphic art. Favorsky taught drawing (1921–29) in the Graphics Faculty of Vkhutemas (Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops) in Moscow and was popular because of his commitment to technical skill, his lack of dogmatism, and his tolerance of experimentation of all kinds. Although he was sympathetic to avant-garde ideas, Favorsky’s own work was firmly representational. His engravings, along with his theoretical analyses of the artistic and technical bases of wood engraving, had a great influence on the development of modern Russian graphics. Until his death Favorsky welcomed younger artists in his studio. Oleg Vassiliev fondly remembered visits to Favorsky’s studio. In his *Metro* series, Vassiliev wanted to investigate and explore the space, its relationship to surface and border, the energy flow in the image, and the transformation of subject and space, using Favorsky’s system as the basis.

Oleg Vassiliev, 7, 5, 3, from the *Metro* Series, 1961–62. Linocut, edition 15.

same time present, through landscape, all the subtleties of the human soul and human memory. In Vassiliev's art, the viewer is often confronted with the painting's spatial-temporal layers of construction, its energetic space. In many works the viewer can trace the artist's hand, a gesture, as the artist purposely leaves out the grid to emphasize the painting's construction.

Vassiliev's paintings are executed with considerable mastery, characterized by the complexity in composition of colors and the variable density of the paint, the combination and juxtaposition of thick and thin strokes, and the application of a light source. Due to his academic training, Vassiliev could, with virtuosity, create artwork in almost any style. But sometimes it could take him days to capture the once-seen and experienced moment of nature, until it was finally rendered with great finesse. It is the combination of the traditional landscape and the new treatment of space and light that makes Vassiliev's works unique.

Vassiliev very often uses literary references (ranging from antiquity to contemporary literary sources), referring, for example, to Anton Chekhov, Homer, William

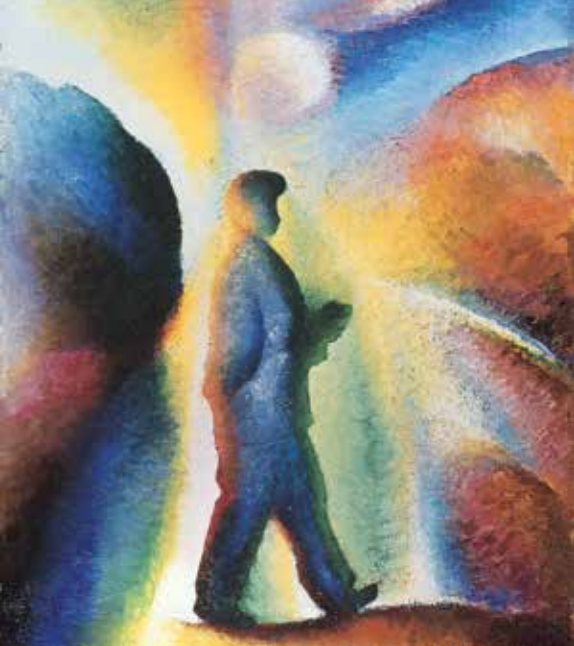
Faulkner, and contemporaries like Vsevolod Nekrasov. For example, *Memory Speaks*, the title of the exhibition and the accompanying book, alludes to Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*; Nabokov's moving account of a loving family, adolescent awakenings, flight from Bolshevik terror, education in England, and émigré life in Paris and Berlin vividly evokes a vanished past in Nabokov's inimitable prose,

while Vassiliev's art represents a journey into the life of an artist in Soviet and contemporary Russia, presented through an often very personal selection of visual images from past and present. As Vassiliev writes in his essay, "On Memory":

Memory is capricious in its choice of subjects. Often, one recalls something quite unimportant; at first glance, it seems incomprehensible why memory retains some things and lets others go. . . . The river of time carries me further and further, and vivid moments immersed in golden light remain on the

banks. Moments experienced just now, in my youth, in my childhood . . . I become, as it were, stretched in time, simultaneously moving in two opposite directions. The first movement takes me, in violation of the natural course of events, further and further back into





Above, from left: Oleg Vassiliev, *Portrait of Ratgauz*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 26¾ x 19¾ in.; Oleg Vassiliev, *Near the Sea*, 1966. Oil on canvas, 35½ x 47½ in. Opposite page: Oleg Vassiliev, *Perspective*, 1983. Black and white paper, collage on cardboard, 21¼ x 20½ in.

the past, into “the glow of days gone by”; the second carries me, the way it’s supposed to be, “ahead” into the silent abyss of the future of which I know nothing and which I experience as a black hole, as an emptiness devoid of matter; a hole that, for me, fills up with life to the extent that it turns into the past.<sup>4</sup>

By extracting and elevating a personal, almost intimate selection of visual images from the past and present and transformed into the future, some of them intensified, some dramatized, Vassiliev captures something more universal, something common to all human memory. In his art Vassiliev can take a small sketch or a drawing and bring it to the viewer’s attention by monumentalizing it and pointing out details that you would not have noticed otherwise. He creates in pictorial form an analogy of the very process by which memories become incorporated into the mind’s consciousness, inviting the viewer to explore the landscape of memory. ■

#### For further reading:

Natalia Kolodzei and Kira Vassiliev, eds. *Oleg Vassiliev: Memory Speaks (Themes and Variations)* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2004); in Russian and English.

*Natalia Kolodzei is the executive director of the Kolodzei Art Foundation and an honorary member of the Russian Academy of Arts. Along with Tatiana Kolodzei, she owns the Kolodzei Collection of Russian and Eastern European Art, which contains more than 7,000 pieces including paintings, drawings, sculptures, photographs, and digital art and videos by more than 300 artists from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Active as a curator and art historian, Kolodzei has curated more than eighty shows in the United States, Europe, and Russia at such institutions as the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg, and the Chelsea Art Museum in New York City. She is coeditor of Oleg Vassiliev: Memory Speaks (Themes and Variations).*

*The Kolodzei Art Foundation, Inc., a US-based 501(c)(3) not-for-profit public foundation started in 1991, organizes exhibitions and cultural exchanges in museums and cultural centers in the United States, Russia, and other countries, often utilizing the considerable resources of the Kolodzei Collection of Russian and Eastern European Art, and publishes books on Russian art.*

For additional information, visit <http://www.KolodzeiArt.org> or email [Kolodzei@kolodzeiart.org](mailto:Kolodzei@kolodzeiart.org).

<sup>1</sup> *Oleg Vassiliev: Memory Speaks (Themes and Variations)*, ed. Natalia Kolodzei and Kira Vassiliev (St. Petersburg, Palace Editions, 2004), 114.

<sup>2</sup> S.S., “Atelier: Oleg Vassiliev,” *A-YA*, no. 2 (1980): 26–31.

<sup>3</sup> Oleg Vassiliev, “How I Became an Artist,” *Pastor*, Cologne, Germany, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Oleg Vassiliev, “On Memory” in Ilya Kabakov, “The Sixties and Seventies: Notes on Unofficial Life in Moscow,” *Wiener Slawistischer Almanach*, vol. 47 (Wien, 1999), 253.