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## The Russian aesthetic: Émigré's gallery showcases emerging artists, culture

By [J. Patrick Coolican](#)

*Seattle Times Eastside bureau*

On the side of a two-car garage of a nondescript Bellevue tract home, a door leads into a small but stylized art gallery that displays hand-painted ceramics, bronze sculptures and paintings — all the work of Russian-born artists.

The 3-month-old Fine Art Vision public gallery is the work of Irina Gorbman, who moved to the United States in 1991 and to Bellevue about six months ago. She is highly educated — mechanical engineering and art history in Moscow, international law and business at Tufts University — and mirthful, with a quick and eager laugh.

Her goal, she said, is to help Russian artists who have either been thrust into the unforgiving American art market or remain in Russia, where poverty is the norm.

The gallery is just the latest manifestation of the emerging Russian culture in the Puget Sound region and in Bellevue in particular.

Vaho Muskheli of the republic of Georgia has had two shows at Seattle's Global Art Venue gallery since November, with another planned for August. Other gallery owners say they're seeing more quality Russian artists lately, even if they're not representing them yet.

That emergence isn't surprising, given demographic trends — the number of Bellevue residents born in Russia or one of the former Soviet republics increased nearly sixfold, to 1,700 from 1990 to 2000, according to U.S. census estimates.

Gorbman's retrofitted garage, in which tract lighting hangs where a garage-door opener might in a more typical home, allows her to work at home and was cheaper than renting a conventional gallery space, she said.

The diverse works are a representative sample of modern Russian art, Gorbman said.

"Love Letter," a ceramic teapot by Katya Apekina, resembles a set of the architectural shapes of Frank Gehry, hand-painted in bright colors. Alexander Gassel's "Fiddler on the Roof," made with egg-yolk tempera, features an angular, almost cubist fiddler, a classic figure in Russian Jewish literature. Prices of the works go into the thousands. Some of the artists live in Russia, others in the United States.

The history of Russian art, say Russian artists and historians, is bound up in Russian Orthodox iconography, French impressionism, and, finally, Soviet politics.



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Nestled inside the garage of Irina Gorbman's Bellevue home is the Fine Art Vision gallery displaying modern culture by Russian-born artists.

### Fine Art Vision

Fine Art Vision in Bellevue, 3833 156th Ave. S.E., features modern Russian art. The gallery will feature Sergey Chaikun in a show called "Our Surrealistic Life." Preview is Thursday from 4 to 9 p.m. The public gallery is open weekends 2 p.m. to 8; weekdays noon to 3 p.m. and 4 to 8 p.m. Call 425-681-9772.

When Joseph Stalin seized power in 1925, he suppressed all art that didn't advance the Soviet socialist cause, said professor Slava Yastremski, a professor of Russian history and culture at Bucknell University and formerly Yale University. The resulting "socialist realism" depicted representational scenes of the proletariat — peasants working the collectivized farms, the Red Army fighting the Nazis, the cosmonauts beating the capitalists into space.

The monolithic artist union, which was a tool of the Communist Party, controlled the schools, museums and exhibits, Gorbman said.

The so-called nonconformist artists, however, sought to throw off the chains of socialist realism to create subversive art that was more abstract, sometimes grotesque, Yastremski said. In 1974, some of these artists created an exhibit that later became known as the "Bulldozer Exhibit," so named after Soviet police destroyed it because it was deemed an enemy of the people.

Beginning in the 1970s when relations with the United States began to thaw, artists came here in droves, especially New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles and San Francisco, Yastremski and Gorbman said.

Russian artists tend to be classically trained, mindful of history and representational, as opposed to abstract in aesthetic bearing, said Seattle resident Masha Boitchouk, who consults art buyers on Russian art.

Artists often defy type, however.

Bellevue resident Alla Slavina, for instance, experiments with different media and creates abstract and conceptual art influenced by her inner life, as opposed to representations of figures or landscapes. "I'm influenced by everything, and most of all by my own emotions," she said through an interpreter.

A set of Slavina's drawings will be shown at the Bank of Washington in downtown Kirkland beginning next month.

Northwest Russians are developing their own styles apart from Russian tradition and the established Russian art scene of the East Coast, Boitchouk said.

Yelena Balikov typifies this trend. The native of southern Russia lives in Redmond and has been accepted to the Parsons School of Design in New York City, where she hopes to weave together her classical Russian art education with recent exposure to American abstraction. She considers her drawings untethered to either, however.

Supporting young artists like Balikov is Gorbman's real mission, she said. "This, this is the passion."

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Irina Gorbman has turned the garage of her Bellevue home into Fine Art Vision, a gallery dedicated to Russian-born artists.

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