



Flowers



Alexandra Pregel: A Search for Self



Alexandra Pregel: A Search for Self
Exhibit: Jan 17 – Feb 23, 2006
From the collection of Julia Gauchman

Visual Arts Gallery
University of Illinois at Springfield
Health and Sciences Building, Room 201
Gallery Hours: 11-6 Monday-Thursday

Cover painting:
Flags



Room

- belongings including 300 paintings in their Paris apartment.
- 1943 Exhibition at the New School of Social Research, New York.
Exhibited 36 new paintings.
- 1944 Became a member of the American National Association of Women Artists.
- 1945 Michail Zetlin's death (Alexandra's step-father), New York.
- 1946 Personal exhibition at the Milch Gallery, New York.
In the years to follow (dates unknown), she participated in annual exhibitions at the Milch Gallery, New York.
- 1947 Exhibition at the Gallery de l'Elysée, Paris.
21st Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture, National Academy of Design, New York.
34th Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, The Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio.
- 1948 Exhibition of American Painters, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh.
- 1948 Illustrated the ancient Russian literary work, *Prince Igor*.
- 1952 Exhibition at Milch Galleries, New York.
- 1956 Exhibition at Wildenstein Gallery, New York.
- 1959 Alexandra's husband, Boris Pregel, is elected as president of the New York Academy of Science.
- 1962 Natalia Goncharova's death.
- 1965 Illustrated *Passover Hagada*.
- 1976 Maria Zetlin's death (Alexandra's mother).
- 1976 Boris Pregel's death.
- 1984 June 28, Alexandra's death.
- 1988 Exhibition of Post-War Works of Alexandra Pregel, Parkland College Art Gallery, University of Illinois Art Gallery, Urbana-Champaign.
- 1995 Exhibitions of Post-War Works of Alexandra Pregel, Parkland College Art Gallery, University of Illinois Art Gallery, Urbana-Champaign.
- 2001 Exhibition "Lonely Soul. Paintings 1930-1960, Paris, New York," Maria and Michail Zetlin Museum of Russian Art, Ramat-Gan, Israel.
- 2003 Group exhibition at the Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow, Russia.
- 2006 Exhibition "Alexandra Pregel: A Search for Self," Visual Arts Gallery, University of Illinois at Springfield.

Compiled by Rosina Neginsky, University of Illinois at Springfield, 2005

Alexandra Pregel: A Search for Self

Rosina Neginsky

Alexandra Pregel (née Avksentiev, 1907- 1984) is a Franco-Russian artist, who spent the last forty four years of her life in the United States. Her works reflect her solid classical training and versatile technique, but, most importantly, they show an artist who was in constant search for new ways of artistic expression. She created works both in a wide variety of genres (still life, landscapes, portraits, nudes, interiors) and in a wide range of styles from figurative to abstract.

Alexandra was the daughter of Maria Zetlin (née Tumarkin, 1882-1976), a talented and independent woman who received a Doctor of Philosophy while living in Switzerland in early 1900s, and of Nikolai Avksentiev (1878-1943), one of the Russian revolutionaries, who was a minister in the Kerensky's provisional government formed after the 1917 February Revolution. Her parents were married in 1906, while imprisoned for political reasons in the famous Saint Peterburg prison, the Fortress of Peter and Paul. After their escape from the prison, they reunited in Finland, but in 1909 were divorced. In 1910 Maria married Mikhail Zetlin, a writer, translator and publisher. In 1919, two years after the Russian October Revolution—described by Russian writer, Ivan Bunin as “Russia’s big downfall”—Zetlin’s family emigrated to France.

Zetlin’s Parisian apartment, called by many “Paradise Salon,” was an artistic and cultural center that was visited by many Russian politicians, intellectuals and artists living in Paris at the time, including members of so-called “École de Paris,” a group of Montparnasse bohemians that counted among its members Amadeo Modigliani, Diego Rivera, Pablo Picasso. It is in that environment that the personality of Alexandra was shaped and her artistic talents were developed.

In 1921, Alexandra began to study painting at the Montparnasse studio of the Russian neo-classic artists Vasili Shukhaev and Alexandr Yakovlev, and then continued at the *École des Arts Décoratifs*, graduating in 1928. A year later, she began to work with one of the leading Russian avant-garde artists, Natalia Goncharova, with whom Alexandra grew increasingly close until Goncharova’s death in 1962. Goncharova believed that art is not an imitation of reality, but its own reality and that the goal of the artist is to express reality in a way that reveals its beauty—to “raise the veil that obscures the beauty of our frightening world.” She also believed that the artists should be able to discover, by the intermediary of art, “what they are looking for unknowingly and that may be otherwise inaccessible to them. . . . Goncharova never forced her artistic vision upon her students, and considered ‘that each person should develop his/her own gifts. These were the

wisdom and values of her teaching.’”¹ It is in this vein that Goncharova encouraged Alexandra and other students to develop their artistic gifts.

In 1932, Alexandra first showed her work publicly in a group exhibition of young Parisian artists. Between 1935 and 1939, she exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants and in 1938 at the Salon d’Automn. In 1938, she also had her first personal exhibition at the Gallery de l’Elysée.

When the Nazis occupied Paris, Alexandra—together with her second husband, Boris Pregel, a physicist, whom she married in 1937—escaped from France and establish-ed herself in the United States, in New York City. Boris Pregel was immediately accepted into the American scientific community and held prestigious positions. Alexandra, however, had to start her career anew and again prove herself as an artist, since among everything left and lost in Paris was the entire body of her extant works, some 300 pieces that she would never see again. At her first exhibition in the United States, in 1943 at the New School of Social Research, she showed thirty-six paintings created since her arrival to the United States. Other exhibitions followed: Milch Gallery



Departure

¹Voiskoun, Alecia. “Lonely Soul. Paintings 1930-1960, Paris, New York.” The Maria and Michail Zetlin Museum of Russian Art, Ramat-Gan, 2000-2001, page 1.

Biographical Data

Alexandra Pregel (née Avksentiev)

Early exhibitions were under the names of Avxente and Bolotov.

- 1906 Alexandra’s parents were married in the Fortress of Peter and Paul in Saint Petersburg.
Father: Nikolai Dmitrievich Avksent’ev (1878-1943), member of the right wing of the Esser’s party, eventually one of the ministers in the Provisionary government, formed by A. Kerensky after the Russian Revolution of February, 1917.
Mother: Maria Samoilovna Tumarkina (1882-1976), a Doctor of Philosophy.
- 1907 December 15, Helsingfors, birth of Alexandra Pregel.
- 1909 Divorce of Alexandra’s parents.
- 1910 Alexandra’s mother’s marriage to Mikhail Osopovich Zetlin (pen name Amari), poet, literary critic and editor; grandson of Wolf Vysotsky, the founder of a tea company.
- 1911 The Zetlin family moves to Paris.
- 1915 Leon Bakst paints Alexandra’s portrait.
- 1915-1916 Diego Riviera paints Alexandra’s portrait.
- 1917 Return to Russia.
- 1918 Return to France.
- 1919 The Zetlins founded the Paris magazine in Russian, *Sovremennye zapiski* (Contemporary Notes).
- 1921 Alexandra began to study painting at the Montparnasse studio of the Russian neo-classic artists Vasili Shukhaev and Alexandr Yakovlev.
- 1925(?)–1928 Studied at the *École des Arts Décoratifs*.
- 1929-1931 Studied with N. Goncharova.
- 1929-1931 Years of marriage to the engineer Bolotov.
- 1932 First exhibition in a group of young Parisian artists. Used the name of Avksentiev.
- 1933-1940 Exhibitions at the Salon des Tuileries, Salon des Indépendants, Paris.
- 1934 Personal exhibition at the Gallery de l’Elysée.
- 1937 Married Boris Pregel, a scientist and a businessman.
- 1938 Exhibition at the Gallery Bernheim, Paris.
- 1940 Escaped with her husband to the United States leaving all their

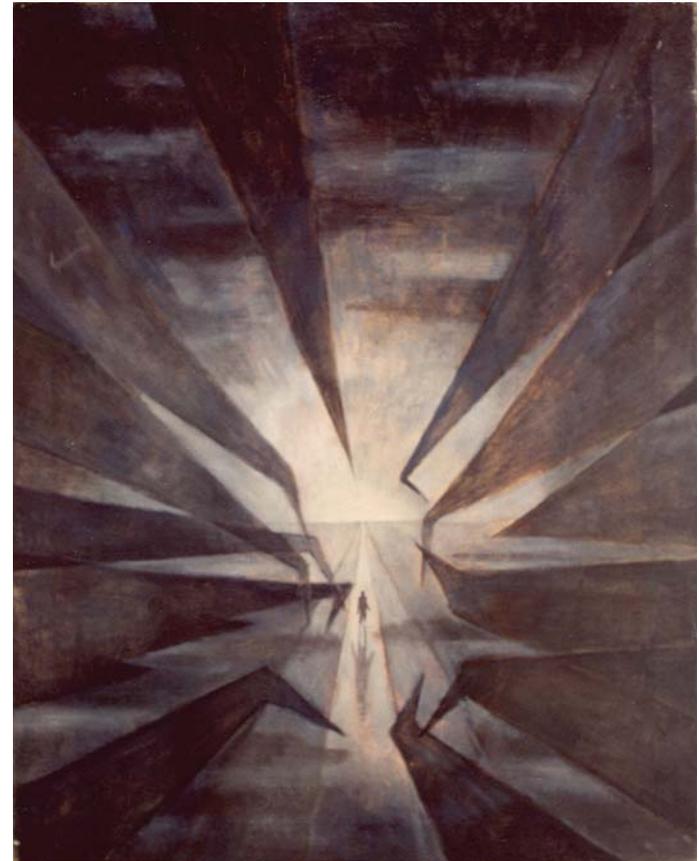


Nude

(1946) and The National Academy of Design in New York (1952); Gallery de L'Elysée, Paris (1947); "Painting in the U.S.A.," with Georgia O'Keefe and Salvador Dali, at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh (1948); and the Wildenstein Gallery, New York (1956).

Pregel was also interested in illustrations and illustrated a number of books: the literary journal, *House Warming* (Novosely), published by poet and translator, Sofia Pregel, the sister of Alexandra's husband, Boris; the first edition of the *New Journal* (Novy journal), published by Boris Pregel's parents, who moved to the United States in the early 1940s; *Prince Igor*, the ancient Russian literary work; the *Bible* and the *Passover Hagada*.

After the death of her husband in 1976, Alexandra stopped painting and participating in exhibitions, but she returned to painting a few years before her own death. She wrote in one of the letters to her niece, Nina Admoni, that painting had given meaning to her life. Alexandra died on June 28, 1984 in New York City.



Light



Dark Sun

Alexandra Pregel was a versatile painter. Unfortunately, since we have only the paintings completed after her emigration to the United States, our study of her works can be only based on her American period. The loss of her Parisian work is likely very significant, since as an artist she did not find emigration to America to be an easy transition. It may have fueled, however, experimentation with many styles and genres. She began as a figurative painter, went through a transitional period between figurative and abstract, and then experimented with abstract art. She also painted in the style of the Surrealists, Cubists and Precisionists. In the latter part of her life, she returned to figurative painting.

Although she did not invent her own style and did not belong to any particular school of painting, her expression in established styles shows her own originality, and especially an individualistic mood of discomfort, estrangement and desperate inner loneliness. Some might say that this mood is not particularly original since it could remind us of the spirit of Pregel's contemporary, Edward Hopper, the well-known American painter of the 1930s and 1940s. The reasons for the appearance in Pregel's works of estrangement and solitude and the artistic ways of expressing them are different from Hopper's. His solitude and the estrangement of his characters are a



Dead Leaves



Broken Eggs

Pregel, Alexandra. “Nezabyvaemoi proshloe” (The Unforgettable Past), from the daily “Russian Thought,” January 22, 1976.

Pregel, Alexandra. “O zivopisi” (About Painting), Julia Gauchman archives, U.S.A.

Varshavsky, S. *Nezamechennoe pokolenie* (The Unnoticed Generation), New York, 1956.

Voiskoun, Alecia. “Lonely Soul,” The Maria and Michail Zetlin Museum of Russian Art, Ramat-Gan, Paintings 1930-1960, Paris, New York, 2000-2001.

Voiskoun, Alecia. “‘Al’bon bytia’ Alexandry Pregel” (‘Album of Being’ of Alexandra Pregel), unpublished article, Julia Gauchman archives, U.S.A.

Zetlin-Domenique, Angelila. “Moia sem’ia” (My Family), “Iz vospominanii” (From the Memoirs), *Novy Zhurnal*, New York, 1991.

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reflection of the American Depression of 1930s, which made people desperate and disconnected, and whose despair was accentuated by their existence in large cities. Pregel’s solitude, discomfort, and estrangement are more likely related to the triple loss of her native cultural environments: the loss of Russia, her original homeland; the loss of France, her adopted homeland; and the loss of Europe, devastated by the Second World War. Remaining deeply an European artist, whose past was destroyed, but who had to go forward toward a world which was inherently foreign to her and with which she never effectively merged, her works characteristically express the spirit of non-belonging and a resulting estrangement and loneliness.

Among the works exhibited at the Visual Arts Gallery of the University of Illinois at Springfield, we can see that spirit of loneliness in all her works, but particularly in the works such as “Departure” (page 2), “Light” (page 3), “Room” (page 17) and “Dead Leaves” (page 13).² Although all the works are painted in different styles, “Room” and “Departure” are figurative paintings; “Dead Leaves” reminds us of the works of the Surrealists, especially Magritte; “Light” is a combination of the abstract and figurative—they all convey the same spirit, the spirit of a certain loss, discomfort and solitude.

Although “Room” and “Departure” are similar in style, there is a striking similarity in composition between “Departure” and “Light,” figurative and abstract. “Departure” and “Light” both represent a small human figure against a vast background. In “Departure,” the figure is surrounded by disproportionately domineering and menacing buildings, whereas in “Light” the figure is in the middle of menacing geometrical structures. The narrowing path and the weight of the buildings and structures create an effect of aggression and claustrophobia. The image of the figure, walking away, having its back turned toward the spectator, accentuates the feeling of solitude, as if this figure were walking away from all hope in humanity.

In “Departure,” red is perhaps associated with blood and struggle, yellow might have an association with betrayal. The combination of red, yellow and blue create a particularly dramatic effect. Is that old city on fire and ready to collapse? Is the lonely figure, carrying a burden and walking away toward an uninviting winter country road leading toward the unknown, reminiscent of Lot, who not only lost his wife and his past, but also his daughters, and has only himself to rely on for his future?

Although the composition of “Light” is similar to that of “Departure”—like “Departure,” “Light” bears the spirit of solitude and aggression, and conveys the sensation of being strangled by the surrounding world—the painting is more optimistic than “Departure.” In “Light,” the figure is leaving the dark space behind it and is entering a space full of light. The light at the distance, illuminating the road, is, perhaps, a symbol of hope. The predominant colors, different shades of

²The exact years when the works were painted are unknown. All titles are given by the author.



Burning City

violet—colors that Pregel would use in her other abstract paintings (see page 4, “Dark Sun”)—have a certain calming effect and suggest the eventual hope for finding inner balance and, perhaps eventually, peace.

The ideas of the painting, “Burning City,” (above) bear some similarities with “Departure,” although “Burning City” is painted in the style of Precisionism, one of the unofficial variations of Cubism and Futurism, characterized by the representation of the rectangular buildings, especially sky-scrapers, an industrial landscape, and the absence of people. “Burning City” is an Apocalyptic work. It depicts a burning and sinking city with no remaining living creatures. The colors of the fire and the fire itself



City Through the Window

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world, bears at least some kind of familiarity. In “Room,” the knitting woman, though lonely, is surrounded at least by familiar objects: her modest furniture, the painting, the photographs, the remains of her breakfast. The process and the product of the knitting centered on the bed create a feeling of warmth, of home. The woman is protected from the outside world by the familiar walls of her room. What she sees outside—the roofs of numerous buildings with the windows that look like blind eyes—is uncomfortable and cold.

“Dead Leaves,” painted in the Surrealist style as a kind of nightmare, is a darker, more accentuated version of the ideas in “Room.” In “Dead Leaves,” the almost abandoned inside world has been invaded by the cold of the outside world. The inside world still has some remains of the familiar, such as the cosy teapot standing on the towel, but at the same time it is a decaying world. The outside world, intruding through the open door, destroys the comfort and cosiness of home and brings with it a *memento mori*, a reminiscence of death, embodied in the dead, dry leaves blown in by the cold wind. The open door is simultaneously a conduit and a mirror for the intrusion and abandonment. For Pregel, whose home was her psychological fortress and an escape from the outside world, the idea of the outside entering inside and imposing its cold Otherness could be a nightmare.

That mood of the inner crisis reappears in Pregel’s semi-abstract works (see front cover, “Flags”). In “Dead Leaves,” Pregel, through pale “dead” colors, conveys the mood of her soul, frozen by despair. In “Flags” however, through dramatic colors—dark and light and their intermediary shades—and the combination of the figurative (red flags moved by the strong wind) and the meeting at the horizon of two almost abstract surfaces of earth and sky, she creates the mood of inner turmoil, of anguish, of the soul ready to rebel. As in many of Pregel’s works, this work does not contain any human figures, which once again stresses her overall feeling of the inner solitude.

The versatility of Pregel’s styles, her ability to use classical ideas and to give to them her own modern interpretation, her search for new ways of expression in Surrealism, Cubism, Precisionism, Abstraction and Figuration, and her striving to find her own styles and colors to express the inner life of her soul and the mood of her generation, make her one of the more interesting painters of the 20th century.

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Pieta

emphasize the Apocalyptic effect of the end of the world. In contrast, the surprisingly peaceful water, a symbol of eventual equilibrium, reflects only the burning fire and its colors, and separates the burning city from the sinking one. Water accentuates the effect of a new beginning, coming after the all-consuming Apocalyptic end.

In “Departure,” the stress is on a lonely individual, the only survivor, and his solitude; whereas in “Burning City,” the stress is on the global destruction of the world, on the dramatic phenomenon of the end. For an artist who lost her own past in a world, destroyed by revolution and war, and whose personal as well as the collective future of her generation were unknown, this Apocalyptic view of the world is a powerful message, a symbol of the state of the soul of her generation. In her modern interpretation of “Pieta” (page 7), in the image of the mourning women over a dead man, a universal image of loss, Pregel reflects on the motif of war, and on the pain associated with the losses of those loved.

The still water in “Burning City,” reflecting the fire, also acts as a mirror, the symbol, inherited by Pregel from her classical training and the study of the Renaissance in the studio of Shukhaev (see page 9, “Still Life With Mirror”). Renaissance artists extensively used that image to convey their view of art and life. A mirror does not only reflect the true reality (*veritas*), the image of the earthly world, but it may also distort it, since the mirror itself is two dimensional and its ability to reflect a three dimensional reality is questionable. In “Burning City,” the calm still water, the mirror reflecting the fire in it, is at once that true and distorted image.

At the same time, a mirror is also a symbol of *vanitas*, the vanity of human existence. Thus, the mirror’s reflection, together with flowers and fragile transparent glass (see back cover, “Flowers”), broken egg shells (see “Still Life with Mirror,” and “Broken Eggs”, page 12) and fallen dry leaves (“Dead Leaves,” page 13) represent the transience of life. In the same characteristic way, Pregel uses the image of fortune cards: “In Pregel’s paintings the motif of cards brings in the nuance of mystery and at the same time the feeling of melancholy and solitude. . . . The same theme of the relationship between the cards, mystery and solitude can be found in Russian emigré poetry.”³ A good example of this representation is the still life with flowers, “Flowers,” (back cover) in the style of *vanitas*. The pack of cards is lying on the table by the vase, creating an impression of a mystery, but also of an abandoned game.

The striking “Still Life with Mirror” demonstrates the complexity of Pregel’s inner life and her relationship with the outside world. The mirror, the part of the still life with Renaissance attributes of the *vanitas*, reflects the door, the interior space, the window and the modern rectangular contemporary city, which contrasts with Pregel’s still life and her interior, and is distant and separated from her world.

³Voiskoun, Alecia. “‘Al’ bom bytia’ Alexandry Pregel” (“Album of Being” of Alexandra Pregel), unpublished article, Julia Gauchman archives, U.S.A.



Still Life with Mirror

The motif of the door and the window, the separation between the exterior and interior, constantly appears in Pregel’s works (see pages 9, 13, 11, and 17). Pregel always worked in her studio located in her huge apartment in Manhattan, across the street from Central Park. When asked for her reasons for not painting outside, she always answered that she felt harassed by the ambling and curious crowds. A more likely reason, however, becomes apparent through her works. Given her history, Pregel, as a person, never felt comfortable in the new surrounding of her outside world, and she also remained an estranged artist. Belonging to the older school of painters, she never entirely embraced new trends in painting, then fashionable in the United States, such as Abstract Expressionism, the movement that was becoming increasingly popular in 1940, when Pregel came to New York City. Thus, in order to paint, she needed to inhabit an environment in which she was comfortable working, an environment that she created inside her apartment and studio. That environment became the extension of her inner world, in which she felt contained and secure. The world outside however, was foreign, different and continued to be uninviting. Often in her works, the world inside, although represented as a part of the transient *vanitas*