

Oleg Vassiliev – Remembrance of Things Past

*“But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restored and sorrows end.”
--William Shakespeare**

For most of us, time usually passes so quickly that we don't notice it until confronted with some life-altering event. A few times each year—on our birthdays, during the Holidays, at New Years, for example—we may stop for a moment to think briefly about the year that has passed and to make plans and resolutions for the year that is to come, but then we go back to work or are forced to deal with problems at home and time goes whizzing by once again.

The world is seen differently, though, by the Russian born artist, Oleg Vassiliev, whose painting *Return Home* (2002) is depicted here. In this painting, an old man is walking in a forest. The man—solitary and with a white beard and cane—walks on a path in the midst of barren birch trees. It is Spring; the man wears a heavy coat and hat, but no gloves. The ground is bare, a mottled pastiche of yellow, brown and light green splotches, which is illuminated by patches of light filtering through the trees, casting bluish shadows that criss-cross the path. The painting has a feeling of detachment and of distance from sentimentality, so we are somewhat surprised to learn that the man portrayed is the artist's father, returning home from a walk on his 91st birthday. The date depicted is May 1, 1988. But the painting was executed 14 years later, in 2002, at the time of the artist's 71st birthday and after his father had died. The forest illustrated in the painting is near Vassiliev's last home in Moscow, in the Northeastern outskirts of the city, far from where the artist's father had spent the majority of his life. When the artist executed the painting, he was also living far from home, in New York, separated from his own son and his closest friends.

Although, at first glance, the image may look like a photograph, a closer look reveals that it is a painting, and this difference is important. This is not a photograph of the artist's father taken at the time of the event on May 1, 1988. Rather, this is the artist's painted recollection of that moment, executed from a perspective that is distanced from the event by both time and place—2002 vs. 1988; New York vs. a forest on the outskirts of Moscow. So the painting doesn't capture a particular moment; rather, it captures the artist's recollection or memory of that past moment.

A good description for Vassiliev's body of work may be “Remembrance of Things Past.” This title is taken from two literary sources of which Vassiliev is certainly aware. The first is Shakespeare's Sonnet XXX (“When to the sessions of sweet silent thought / I summon up remembrance of things past...”), from which the translated title of Marcel Proust's epic seven-volume, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, is derived.* Like Proust's protagonist, Vassiliev has constantly sought to refine his memory and understanding of the past. But ultimately, one must question how this is possible when time and age cause memories to fade. By what process do we recollect? How does memory work? Is it that we are left with memories intact and bundled, ready to come to the surface of our consciousness? Or do we construct memories from pieces of information gleaned with effort, thereby potentially combining, reconfiguring or “creating” memory?

There is a famous excerpt from Proust's classic referred to as the “madeleine scene” wherein the protagonist's memory is jarred when he takes a bite of madeleine cake steeped in tea. He's unable to put his finger on the exact recollection prompted by this action, but the sensation causes warm and joyful thoughts to overtake his memory. He racks his brain all the while trying to regain that first jolt of recognition through subsequent bites. Finally, he recalls that his aunt used to give him this treat when he greeted her on Sunday mornings.

* *Sonnet XXX.*

* Proust's title used to be translated in English as *Remembrance of Things Past*. Recently, however, it has been more accurately translated as, *In Search of Lost Time*.

For the viewer, Vassiliev's painting becomes the provocative object that the madeleine and tea were to Proust's narrator. The painting is a provocation to thought because it speaks to us of an honest and authentic experience. We do more than merely see this painting, we also feel it. When viewing this painting, we may be suddenly overcome. In the words of Proust's character, "[A feeling of pleasure] had immediately made the vicissitudes of life unimportant to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory, acting in the same way that love acts, by filling me with a precious essence: or rather this essence was not in me, it was me." In other words, a sensory response overtakes us and we are taken through time on a journey of the mind, the present experience of the painting provoking our own recollection of the past.

Vassiliev's "Remembrance of Things Past" is Shakespearean in tone. Shakespeare's sonnet is somber and melancholy but concludes with a touch of hope. It addresses aging and the feeling of not having accomplished enough ("I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought..."), and laments the loss of those close to him ("For precious friends hid in death's dateless night..."). For Shakespeare, the recollection of the past causes him to grieve anew, to mourn the loss of many. Yet when he thinks of one person, referred to in the sonnet as "dear friend," his sorrow is abated. We get the sense that this is true of Vassiliev as well. Living in New York, so far removed from friends and family, he recalls his beloved father on his 91st birthday, and "All losses are restored and sorrows end."

Return Home allows us quite literally to see the world through Vassiliev's eyes. The painting is autobiographical; it is a reflection of the artist's past life and his distance from it in the present. This perhaps is why the novelist and art critic Francine Prose asks of Vassiliev's work, "why do we feel that these seemingly peaceful, deserted landscapes are so thickly populated by restless ghosts?" This painting allows us to sense Vassiliev's past. Even more, though, our contemplation of the painting causes us to reflect on our own past – to be taken on our own journey through memory as if we had just taken a bite of nostalgia-inducing cake.

- Heather C. Brod

Vassiliev was born in Moscow in 1931 and left his native land in 1990. He first settled in New York, but since 2005 has lived in a Minneapolis-St. Paul suburb. Vassiliev's work has always focused on themes of memory and nostalgia, his subjects being friends, family, and locations where they lived, worked, and recreated.

Although Vassiliev's work was first shown in the West in 1977, it did not receive much attention outside the Eastern Bloc countries until the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, Vassiliev has been recognized as one of Russia's leading painters. His work has been shown throughout the world, including the United States, Italy, France, Norway, Canada, Spain, Chile, Japan and Germany. In 2004, Vassiliev had a major retrospective of his work at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the world's leading museum of Russian art. Vassiliev's work is included in numerous public and private collections. In 2007, Forum Gallery, New York, (www.forumgallery.com), hosted an exhibition of his drawings. This winter, from 26 November 2008 – 23 January 2009, Faggionato Fine Art, London, (www.faggionato.com) is hosting an exhibition of Vassiliev's recent paintings. The exhibition is accompanied by a full-color catalogue with an essay by the art historian Mark Gisbourne.