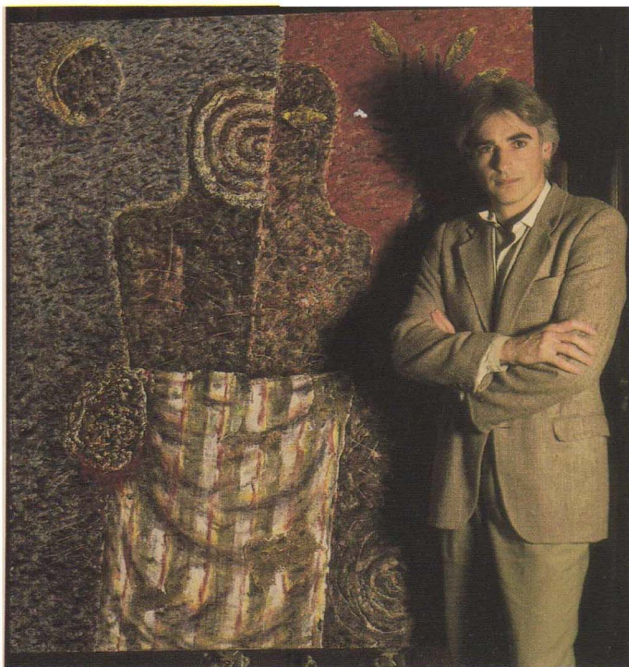


Rick Bard's
**MANHATTAN
PACE**

Alexander Kaletski beside his painting 'War and Peace.'



ART IN AMERICA

"PAINTING WAS THE FIRST thing I started to do," says **Alexander Kaletski**, "and I still can't stop."

In 1975 Alexander emigrated here from Russia, where painting is permissible only in the service of the government. Creating such non-controversial art was exciting for him when he was a child; at six years of age he illustrated Pushkin's fairy tales, winning first prize in a national competition. But by the age of 18 he had acquired his own style—which he didn't want to subvert for the state's approval. "My paintings dealt with abstract ideas in concrete form. There was nothing about Lenin, Stalin, or the Revolution. . . They could not be exhibited in Russia."

Alexander started to have underground exhibits for his friends. "I also started to sell my paintings. This is a crime in Russia, to sell paintings without approval of the government. But everything in Russia is sold

illegally, because there is nothing to buy legally. On the black market you could buy anything from a pound of meat to a Kaletski."

Only official 'Artists of the Soviet Union' are allowed to sell their works legally. They gain the right by graduating from one of the state sanctioned art schools of Social Realism. "Social Realism states that all paintings are political—but they must present positive, not critical, points of view on Soviet life—which means all workers should be smiling, and the scene should appear very pastoral with red flags and hammers and sickles all around. If you paint something with sharp edges, if it's abstract, or if it has elements of surrealism—it is forbidden. The only way to get a diploma is to paint the Communist way."

Alexander rejected such stilted art studies, and instead chose to study acting and stage design. "In Russia, it's more artistic, because on stage you can present a fantasy world, and no one will consider it political."

He entered a theatre company and eventually toured the U.S. with the group, staying in Saratoga, N.Y. for two weeks. "It was like a dream. You are sleeping, and you are inside of it—actually part of the dream—for days and days. You don't believe it's reality."

"Every Russian has been taught to think America is so polluted. We were expecting to see only garbage fields and rusting metal pipes. . . But it was beautiful trees, grass, and sky. It was just so natural. We have untouched nature only in Siberia—so only prisoners see it! It also was unbelievable that all the stores had their doors open and goods were on display. To us, it was unimaginable that there wasn't constant stealing."

Returning to Russia after the tour, Alexander could no longer accept a restricted life, and he began the long bureaucratic process that eventually permitted him to immigrate to America. He arrived with so little money he couldn't even buy art supplies, but the land of opportunity was plentiful. "I found beautiful cardboard that had been thrown away. To my Russian eye, I couldn't believe it."

Within a month of his arrival he began selling his work. "I used to write underground songs in Russia, and I was invited to present them in a concert. I was performing in a little cafe, and to create more of an atmosphere, I displayed my watercolors in the lobby. To my surprise, after the concert people scrambled around trying to buy my paintings. I did not want to part with my art and had no intention of selling. In America, I was told, when you have a show you have to sell. So, I gave in and sold several paintings. I had to learn to be an American."

Today, Alexander's paintings reflect his increased sense of freedom. "I'm working in two directions. 'Portraits of angular people,' where I'm trying to show not just some interesting individuals, but also the mysterious world inside of them. Through the angular structure around the person I'm trying to capture a hidden subconscious world of the character. Yet it's not an abstract painting. It's a figurative painting, an almost realistic portrait, with surrealist and abstract elements."

"The second direction is 'dreamscapes.' I'm painting about what we see and feel in our dreams. It has some strange feelings. There's a fear and a tension, and at the same time, it's pleasant."

Several years after arriving in the U.S., Alexander also started writing a book. Titled 'Metro,' it was published by Viking in 1985. A 'Novel of the Moscow Underground,' it describes a Russia, "which no one from outside the country sees. It's how the Russians live their everyday lives."

"Everything in Russia is illegal—to express yourself freely, to create something original, to live where you want. It's as if to take a breath of fresh air you must get permission from the government. So anyone in Russia trying to achieve something must live an underground life."

Alexander took the Moscow subway system ('The Metro') as the title of his book, "because it's really the most beautiful man-made structure in Moscow. It's all marble and arches and spaces. . . So in Moscow, just as spiritual beauty is forced underground, architectural beauty is also underground. But here in the U.S. beauty is surrounding you always. Here, beauty is a driving force of art, life, and productivity."

But that creates another danger for the creative spirit. "In America, it's easy to get trapped in commercialism—to sell yourself out. In Russia it's the opposite. If you are doing something beautiful and interesting—you hide it. You keep it for yourself and your friends underground. You can't sell it in a mass-market way anyhow."

"But here you are tempted to market your art to as many people as possible—and therefore to produce for production—not for what you really feel. You are tempted to use the same old formula everybody expects from you."

However, as Alexander appreciates so well, in America, the choice is yours. □