

Boris Smirnoff (1894 – 1976) – A Biography

Written for The Vineyard at Stockcross by Noel Napier Ford
With Foreword by Sir Peter Michael

A FETISH

It has been remarked that I have a fetish for the naked female body, and indeed although a lifetime admirer of the female form, that is not the reason why there are so many naked ladies in the suites at The Vineyard.

The artist Boris Smirnoff was a white Russian who settled in France following the pogroms of 1917. He was an adventurer, travelling in South America, Europe and Japan (the latter where he became deeply enamoured with Fujita, whose style he somewhat emulates).

Somewhere on these travels he bumped into and became a great friend of Errol Flynn, who was also an adventurer. Eventually Boris attended practically every party that Errol Hosted. Many of these were on board his yacht moored in the Mediterranean, where he drew and painted the many women, starlets and movie stars who crossed Errol Flynn's life.

My father became a great friend of Boris Smirnoff until he died in 1976, when subsequently my father purchased the studio collection, which has lain unseen for many years until we were able to display them at The Vineyard.

I hope you enjoy them. Some of the more intimate ones are in the suites, with the others in the corridors; and the very recognisable faces of starlets are in the gent's toilet (the ladies have Grace Kelly).

That Boris Smirnoff was born in the Russian town of Kharkow in 1894 and died in the South of France on 9th December, 1976 are established facts: whereas details of his early life before arriving in Paris in the early Twenties and subsequent permanent residence in Haut-de-Cagnes-sur-Mer from 1926 remain obscure. Through conversations with friends and villagers during his lifetime however, it appears that he was born into a middle class family and received a good education. He served as a cadet in the Tsar's army and fled Russia shortly after the 1917 Revolution, eventually arriving in Japan.

The duration of Smirnoff's sojourn in Japan is unknown but clearly he spent sufficient time there for him to become fascinated with the style and aesthetics of that country, awakening his own artistic sensibilities and leading to what was, probably his first commission, some decoration for the Italian Embassy in Tokyo. Throughout his life Smirnoff evidenced a sense of adventure and even restlessness, a characteristic often remarked upon by those who knew him. Thus it was that he eventually tired of Japan, travelled in Borneo and a short spell on a rubber plantation, before finally deciding that the West offered more.

Arriving in Paris in the early Twenties Smirnoff found the cosmopolitan milieu of Paris an intellectual and artistic shock. For this articulate but as yet unfocused young Russian, Montparnasse was an extraordinary environment. With figures such as Picasso, (with whom Smirnoff became acquainted later) and Braque making their revolutionary impact on 20th century art, he found himself immersed in the cultural arguments and passions of the time.

The privations that he and many of his contemporaries experienced can only be imagined but Smirnoff obtained work as a decorator, carrying out murals at the café 'La Coupole' in the Place Vavin while also studying at the Ecole des Beaux Arts under Lucien Simon. He was successful in 1925 at the Galerie Bellamy, holding an exhibition of oil paintings and watercolours representing Chateau La Grange, the one time home of General Lafayette. A watercolour from this exhibition can be seen in Suite No. 103.

It was during this period of Smirnoff's Paris experience that he met the young Japanese artist Tsuguharu Foujita (1886-1968), already resident in Montparnasse and similarly mixing with the 'avantgarde', many of whom became leading figures of the 'School of Paris'. It is not difficult to imagine that Smirnoff's knowledge of Japan, its language and customs were instrumental in cementing a friendship which, in 1926, led Smirnoff to follow his friend's advice to move to the South of France.

So it was in Haut-de-Cagnes-sur-Mer that Smirnoff set up his home and studio, eventually becoming a well-known and popular member of the local community, and it is from these acquaintances that much of what is known of him has been compiled. While apparently a friendly humorous personality, always ready to participate in the life of the village, a 'raconteur' and 'bon viveur', there was an impenetrable side to his character, a kind of secretiveness. Also a restlessness, assuaged perhaps by frequent travel but, whatever reservations there may have been, it is clear he never experienced difficulty finding models for the figure subjects and portraits that comprised the main body of his work.

Close proximity to the Riviera soon brought Smirnoff into contact with the rich and famous. A list of those whose portraits he made would be lengthy indeed but at two extremes it included David Lloyd George and later, in the 50's, Sir Winston Churchill. There is also a portrait of Mussolin in the residual collection of Smirnoff's work but whether this was from life or not is uncertain.

What is certain is that Smirnoff's engaging personality and ubiquitous presence led to all kinds of fascinating situations and association with famous people, especially stars of stage and screen. Of particular note was the meeting with the swashbuckling Errol Flynn whom he portrayed a number of times. This friendship led to an invitation to New York and a commission to portray Flynn's first wife, the actress Lily Damita.

Some thirty years later he went to New York again, this time to paint a portrait of Patricia Wymore who was about to become Flynn's third wife. Smirnoff attended the much-publicised wedding that took place in October 1950, in Nice, but sadly this marriage was brief, the even being followed shortly afterwards by Flynn's death. Other subjects from this time included stars such as Edward G. Robinson, himself an avid collector of Impressionist art, Jean Harlow, Norma Shearer and Barbara Stanwick, all of whose portraits hang at the Vineyard along with one from more recent times, that of Grace Kelly.

The large collection of Boris Smirnoff's art at the Vineyard contains examples from all periods of his life illustrating the varied techniques he employed, though portraiture and figure compositions predominate. It is in these, where he uses coloured crayon, pastel and watercolour washes within a delicate outline that his work most closely resembles that of his friend and mentor, Foujita. Like him he occasionally worked

onto a gold leaf background, an example of which can be seen in Room 111. Stylish, sophisticated watercolours from the Twenties and scenes from the bull fight are in the Vineyard restaurant, while early, more illustrative work reminiscent of scenes from 'B' Movies, together with colourful landscapes and still-lives from later years adorn the hotel's suites and corridors.

Throughout his life, and especially once he had established a repertoire, Smirnoff was able to find venues for exhibitions. Mostly along the Riviera and in Cagnes-sur-Mer, but also at the Bloomsbury Gallery, London, in the 1930's: Paris in 1929 and 1933; Lisbon in 1930, and once in Shepherd's Hotel in Cairo. Much later, in the 1950's, Brazil, Paraguay and Venezuela and wherever his travels took him. The Vineyard collection includes posters for some of these events. While Smirnoff appears to have achieved success on a personal basis as between artist and client, public recognition proved more elusive. Nevertheless he has an entry in volume 9 of the *Dictionnaire des Peintres, Sculpteurs, Dessinateurs et Graveurs* published by Benezit mentioning acquisitions by the Museums of Cagnes-sur-Mer, Cairo, Grenoble, Moscow and Prague.

A comprehensive biography of this interesting but somewhat elusive character was compiled a little while after the artist's death in 1976, together with a catalogue of many of his works. It is hoped, however, that this resume will awaken further interest in the substantial collection of Boris Smirnoff's art that graces the Vineyard at Stockcross.

Noel Napier-Ford