

A Visit With Tamara Sanchez

BY SHELAGH WILKINSON AND LUDMILA ENIUTINA



Tamara Sanchez was born in 1940 into a big family in Lazarevka, a mountain village in the North Caucasus. Her father drove trucks, and her mother brought up the five girls and a boy.

I spent my childhood among the Caucasian wildlife and picturesque landscapes. The wild poppies that grew in the mountain gorges, scarlet against the stone; the eagles who soared above: I loved it all — even the snakes and scorpions. We children spent our days in the open. We made tree-houses, climbed the mountains, and bathed in the cold streams. Wasn't it a happy time. When I grew a bit, I was sent to tend goats. My goats were a docile lot, just pets — lucky for me. I took them far into the woods, and let them go where ever they pleased, while I did some handiwork with wild flowers. I still prefer natural materials. Nothing is more beautiful than nature.

After she finished the local art school, Tamara found a job with the Rostov Arts and Crafts Workshop, and designed patterns for fabrics, scarves and neckties. In 1965, she went to Moscow to continue her studies at the Textile Institute, fashion-design department. Then, for three years, she worked at the Moscow Knitwear Factory as artist designer. The job was quite unlike what she had had in Rostov. Gross output was the management's sole concern, and the young designer's quest seemed nonsense to her bosses. "Enough is enough," she said flatly, after three years of the drudgery, and settled as a free-lance artist. In 1976, she was triumphantly admitted to the Soviet Artists' Union on the recommendation of the renowned Pyotr Konchalovsky and several other major colleagues. —L. E.

Tamara Sanchez Today

You walk in off the street, the dull dreary street, up stairs that are again like those found in every other

Moscow apartment; you open the door, and it is... incredible! It is filled; every nook and cranny is filled with art. Going into Tamara Sanchez's apartment in Moscow, you feel that you have arrived home. Going into some fine art gallery you don't. Your heart rejoices when you see women like this, who are defining their own parameters of art, and who are indeed creating what we recognize. Even the chairs are pieces of art, painted all over and arranged in a special way. Environments matter very much to women because they're in them all the time, and women make theirs so that it reflects themselves.

Through what must have been years and years of dreadful economic and psychological depressions, Tamara, in the middle of Moscow, has created a cross between a haven and Aladdin's cave. Tamara is totally happy with whatever she picks up. Whether it is wood, felt, pottery or clay, leather, embroidered materials, the wooden eggs or the dolls she collects — anything she puts her hand to becomes elevated because of her creative response. That is what the imagination does. It elevates the mundane to fine art, and then it gives everybody joy. We share in it. It is incredible, this place.

When I visited Tamara Sanchez's home, I felt I'd been there before and I didn't quite analyze why until she said, "When I bring a new acquisition in, it cries out for a place. So I rearrange everything. Some things meet each other after a long separation." I thought of Chaika Wiseman and her dolls. When you went into Chaika Wiseman's house, from floor to ceiling, on tops of doors, on door knobs, on window panes, on chesterfields, on chairs, were dolls. Everywhere. And in the middle of it was this wonderful old woman, sick, eighty years-old, and still sewing dolls to give joy to somebody else. Chaika Wiseman said she never makes one doll, they need each other, so that one doll brings into being another.

Chaika, too, has Russian roots and those roots, I think, are in the way she works; in her vision. The use of whatever comes to hand and turning it into an expression of your love or your



Tamara Sanchez in her home photo ESTER REITER

concern for a bigger thing than you are; a way of bringing joy to the self, while knowing that you are bringing joy to somebody else, those are very much a part of her work, as it is of Tamara's.

The artist gives it such elevation because she loves the material so much, and so then we have high art. No doubt about it. The Soviet Union has realized that this is fine art, and has put her pieces in museums and art galleries.

Tamara takes leather, or wood, or whatever is at hand, and puts them together. She must have overcome tremendous mechanical problems to make her art. She explains how she took a simple thing, combined it with other things, and, in her words, "brought folk art to the head of high art." Like Chaika Wiseman, there is a sense of joy and fun in her work:

I made a costume that was quilted but shiny, and made the decoration out of fishing lure. It was exhibited as high fashion. Next I will make a big costume out of walnut shells. You do that with your tongue-in-cheek, and you think, 'well, can I pull it off?'

And they take the bait, as it were — and they're hooked! They think, 'by God the audacity of the artist to do this... it's a new statement,' and the artist sits back and has a giggle. I think the Soviets have recog-



nized something that is magnificent and I wish the Canadian government would recognize more women. In Canada we are still looking for a place for Chaika Wiseman's dolls. Chaika had this audacity: she couldn't walk down the street without stopping to pick up a button and a fishing lure. People would send her old plastic bottles, she would take the old nets that you keep your onions in, and by putting different material inside would get a shiny face or a dull face. Chaika did it intuitively but what Chaika was doing is the same as Tamara. Tamara has been trained and is moving to a different level.

In literature, as in art, using the material you find at hand is like writing the self into being. Tamara's work drew us into it so

that we wanted to touch. I kept thinking, could we take a piece back? Could we hold onto it? Her work was so intricate, such craft built into it. Her imagination as well — it too was so finely crafted. In both women, Chaika Wiseman and Tamara Sanchez, you get the sense of play, the sense of joy, the colours that are so abundant, and the ability to make the most of the materials you've got at hand.

Tamara Sanchez talked to us about democracy, and what she saw happening in the Soviet Union today. She was involved in an exhibit of paintings, the proceeds of which would go to the Peace Fund. Art crosses boundaries where nothing else does. Something in art is always universal. I think that the universal aspect of art makes it a wonderful vehicle for women artists to cross international lines and talk together. I do believe it's a great force for peace, going across international lines with art. It brings people together in a very sympathetic way. I don't think anyone could go to the Soviet Union and see their ballet and their theatre and not be moved to tears. It would be impossible.

— S. W.

Shelagh Wilkinson is the Founding Editor of CWS/cf. She teaches Women's Studies at Atkinson College, York University. Ludmila Eniutina, formerly a journalist with Novosti Press, is currently a managing editor with Moscow News.

