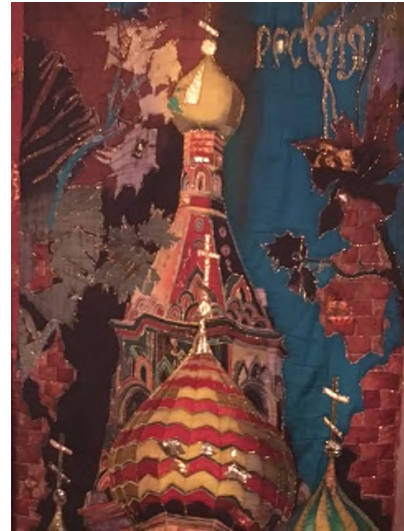


The Russian Art Quilt

In the winter of 1991, a group of Russian textile artists living in Moscow were waiting to have permission to come to NYC to exhibit their various collections. They had to wait and wait, and finally, on Christmas Eve day they were released to fly to NYC and meet with the directors of the Fashion Institute of Technology.....Except that by the time they arrived in NYC, on Christmas Eve, everyone had left FIT except one secretary, and she was getting ready to drive to Detroit for Christmas with her parents. The building was closing and she couldn't reach anyone on staff. They were very elegant women, and beautifully dressed. They each had a very large suitcase. She loaded the 4 Russian artists into her station wagon and set off for Detroit! They spoke no English. No money except rubles. Nowhere to change money!



When they arrived in Detroit, the secretary called me in Grand Rapids, as she had my name from our magazine, *Lady's Circle Patchwork Quilts*, published in NYC. The Russian artists wanted to go to the Detroit Art Museum, and the Chicago institute of Art. Could I help them? I suggested she bring the 4 Russian artists to Grand Rapids for a few days while making arrangements for them to visit the two Art venues. We made reservations at the Amway Grand Plaza for them, and they arrived at our family farm in Grand Rapids in the middle of a blizzard. We had set up a buffet reception there for them including the Mayor, (Jerry Helmholdt at the time) and his wife, and a Russian interpreter from Grand Valley, and an Amway executive and a few other dignitaries. My brother was a county commissioner at the time and was hosting the very impromptu event.

The artists were very Russian, aloof, elegant, and non-English speaking. They did not understand the buffet concept that all the food on the table would be put on plates and taken away from the table to eat! In Russia, it was customary to sit around the table and drink and dine. But, the interpreter helped clear things up! (We must have seemed like peasants!) After dinner chit chat (with difficulty) ensued then they each opened their suitcases in private, and made us leave the room while each artist lay out a vignette of her wares. From clothing, to shoes, to quilts, and scarves.....then we were called into the living room to oohhh and ahhhh. But..... they did not have a clue about American prices. \$40 dollars or \$400? Meant nothing to them, and the interpreter couldn't help with that!

My grandmother and grandfather came from Russia, so we were especially excited for this opportunity! We enjoyed the challenges of the evening, and I fell in love with a portion of a Russian quilted triptych, featuring St. Basils, and the subtle depicting of the crumbling of the Soviet Union. (The other panels featured St. George and the Dragon, another panel I don't remember) I arranged for the artists to visit our own Grand Rapids Art Museum the following day, and for the Grand Rapids Press and TV 13 to come to the hotel for an interview, which took place in front of the giant gilded sunburst in the lobby, the perfect setting for the ornate Russian Haute Couture outfits they wore, complete with headdresses. The interviews took place at the exact time the announcement was made that the Soviet Union was dissolved! Very timely and informative, thanks to our interpreter! Our family all gathered for the event.

Then the artists and secretary were off to Chicago, and the Art Institute, a return to Detroit, then NYC's FIT after the Christmas holiday week. We met again for brunch shortly after, at Windows on the World in NYC's Twin Towers, in preparation for a photo shoot for our magazine. That was when we negotiated for the panel I coveted by the artist Elena Pelovena. It is batik, there is the contrast of burlap, silver lame', sparkling gold threads, all subtle messages by the textile artist. The back depicts the old Soviet flag, with the hammer and cycle emblem. My Russian artist adventure had a lasting happy ending!