

Marie Struve (1925–2020)

Raphaël Lopoukhine

Marie Struve passed away on November 13, 2020. Daughter of Father Alexander Eltchaninoff and wife of Nikita Struve, she grew up and spent her life among the greatest luminaries of the Russian Orthodox emigration. Above all, she will be remembered as one of the most important iconographers of our time.

Maria Struve in 1960.

Often, telluric points are linked to a person's passage on earth. Places where a person lived, loved, and suffered can tell a great deal about her. Marie Struve was born in Nice, a few steps from its Russian cathedral, where her father, Alexander Eltchaninoff, served as a priest for the large Russian immigrant community. She learned to speak Niçois, Russian, and French at the same time. Later in life, she acquired a lemon tree that helped her remember the Mediterranean town of her childhood.

Then there is Tbilisi, a town she called by its Russian name, Tiflis, and that she first visited at an advanced age. Her mother, Tamara Levandovskaya, herself a famous iconographer, was the daughter of a Russian military officer based in Georgia, who had founded the very first co-ed school in the Russian Empire. Vladimir Levandovsky hired a young historian named Alexander Eltchaninoff to be the school's principal. Tiflis was so important for Marie that on her travels to Moscow, she would always seek out the famous Georgian "finger grapes" at the local markets.

The other two places are the house she shared with her husband in Parisian suburb of Villebon-sur-Yvette and their little cottage in Bussy-en-Othe near a monastery, full of her icons, where she taught her art to the nuns.

The tiny cottage has two Lilliputian bedrooms and no kitchen, running water, or basic facilities. The Struves lived there in the summer, spending most of their time outside. Basic comforts were dismissed with a shrug, but they loved reading under the pine trees. Branches rustled gently above their heads as the wind blew quietly and the air smelled of resin.

The old stone house in Villebon is surrounded by a circular garden full of roses. The bathroom is in the kitchen, and until a few decades ago, the toilets were still outside in the backyard. Nikita and Marie worked, read books, and received friends, family, and fellow intellectuals around the fireplace in the winter and in the garden in the summer. Marie Struve's "workshop" was





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The Annunciation.
Details of an icon by
Maria Struve.

merely a rough wooden table next to her bed, right under a huge bow window that provided generous daylight. She never worked at night because she maintained that artificial light altered the perception of colors—an irony, since her icons were often made for the semi-darkness of Orthodox churches.

A Discreet Paradox

The process of painting Orthodox icons is often described as at least as spiritual as it is artistic. Although she had studied iconography with Sister Joanna Reitlinger, Marie Struve was not a proponent of this notion. Here lies one of her mysteries. Although she never pretended to fast or pray in order to work, the famous Russian poet and philosopher Olga Sedakova, who was one of Marie's great admirers, said of her icons, "Her images breathe and pray, and call to prayer." How can one explain this paradox? Marie Struve didn't define herself as a mystical person. On the contrary, she emphasized the technical aspects of iconography. Yet her paintings radiate spirituality and mysticism.

"Once, Macha told me that writing icons was just like making crêpes!"

remembers Alain Dufourcq, a French iconographer. "She meant by that, jokingly, that this endless repetition of a discreetly sacred act, within a contemporary world that only supports the originality of aesthetic 'dispersion' . . . was similar to the discretion inherent to the 'prayer of the heart,' the perpetual repetition of the divine name which has no need of external manifestation. It is, moreover, the same message that master iconographers have always conveyed to me, seeing in this sacred discipline an extension of hesychasm."

Rembrandt and the Early Italians

Marie Struve often repeated that she never had the opportunity to study art formally. In fact, she felt a certain complex about it. She had to quit school early due to her delicate health and to World War II, which she spent mostly in bed with tuberculosis and pneumonia. Yet she managed to teach herself perfect English, reading "*dans la langue de Shakespeare*" most of the English literary canon, and even, for some reason, some French literature. She also completed a course at the prestigious *École des Beaux-Arts* in Paris. She took great pleasure in wandering the galleries of the Louvre and other museums,

especially when she could take one of her grandchildren with her. She would go to the Flemish galleries first. Rembrandt's *Pilgrims at Emmaus* paintings made the deepest impression on her, thanks to their silky light emanating from the figure of Christ. Her favorite version of this scene was the one at Jacquemart André Museum because the source of the light radiating in the whole scene is hidden behind Christ.

She would then move on to the late mediaeval Italian painters, in whose works she found her true inspiration. Although she appreciated Leonardo Da Vinci, she felt that something was lost when Italian masters started to introduce linear perspective and oil paint instead of egg tempera. The similarity between Russian icons and Italian

Primitives is obvious. Both come from the same source, Byzantine religious art. Marie Struve wasn't much of an artistic revolutionary. Her art is deeply rooted in the Russian tradition she inherited, enhanced by the intimate familiarity with Western masterpieces.

In the Shadows

Marie Struve is often portrayed in the shadow of her husband, the writer Nikita Struve. She found this position comfortable, hating above all to be praised and celebrated. She reluctantly accepted payment for her icons, and did so only because her fellow iconographers had once complained that she gave her work away for free when they relied on that income. Marie Struve helped her husband in his work—for example, proofreading Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* and thus enabling it to be published so quickly in 1973. Few knew that their help was mutual. Nikita Struve spent hours preparing canvases from wood boards, doing fastidious manual labor in his Villebon office.

Her passing was not a sad event. A couple decades ago, she made her family promise that they would be joyful at her falling asleep, since she would at least be reunited with her dear father, with her siblings, her mother, and finally, with her lifetime companion Nikita. She also made them promise to light a lantern at the bottom of the cross on her grave. She had no idea at that time that this lantern would be powered by the sun. ✨

Martyrs Cyrus and John. Icon by Maria Struve.



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Nikita and Maria
Struve.