

Evgenia Kuzmina Interview

ELIZABETH GORAYEB: Good morning. I'm Elizabeth Gorayeb, and it's October 26th, 2020. I'm speaking with Evgenia Kuzmina and Jenn Gimblett remotely as part of the WPI's Paul Gauguin oral history series. Evgenia, do I have your permission to record this interview?

EVGENIA KUZMINA: Yeah, of course.

EG: Wonderful, thank you so much. So, I'm wondering if you can give us a little bit of a personal introduction and tell us a bit about your research experience before joining the WPI.

EK: Sure. I've been working on this all my life, on the art and the particular -- the art and aesthetics of modern art. Doctor in Art History, my professional experiences and expertise in research methods, archival processing, and scientific publication. Indeed, my life transpired between the walls of the museums in Spain and France, mostly. I've been working in Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid, I've been working in Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, and Committee Chagall in Paris. And in Museum of Chagall in Nice. And I've been involved in a number of provenance research projects and the inventory of the collections, and the organizing of the exhibitions. My work has given me the opportunity to explore numerous international archives and to establish relationships with numerous institutions, museums, and galleries that, of course, helped me a lot with the Gauguin catalogue raisonné project.

EG: Great. So, when did you join the WPI and start working on Gauguin?

EK: It was (sighs) one year and a half ago. Yeah. But actually, my first encounter with Paul Gauguin's work happened in

Russia, in the museums of Moscow and St. Petersburg, with this wonderful collection of impressionist and modern French art. The Pushkin Museum, for example, conserves a great amount of archival sources on Russian collectors. Not only very well-known ones such as Morozov or brother Shchukin or [Pyotr?]. But also less-known ones, really very related to Gauguin, such as Victor [Gogobuv?], Paul Ettinger, or Sergey Makovsky, who was also a well-known poet and art critic, and he was responsible for the organization of the exhibition of French art in 1912, where Gauguin was very well-represented. As well, it's very interesting, because for me, from Russia -- I'm Russian, yeah? -- the Gauguin had really very important influence on the culture of nineteenth and twentieth century. He was widely represented on the pages of symbolist art journals, such as *Mir iskusstva*, the *World of Art* in English, *Apollon*, *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, and he was reproduced, his works were commended, and his masterpiece, *Noa Noa*, has been published with the commentaries of Makovsky, who also influenced a lot -- the paintings of Russian avant-garde. So, for me, of course, he was one of the greatest encounters from my very (unclear) childhood, yeah.

EG: Wow, so that's quite a bit of experience on Gauguin. So, the Gauguin catalogue raisonné, of course, is a huge, huge undertaking. And it's almost intimidatingly large. I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about how you even began with your research when faced with the project at the WPI. Where did you begin?

EK: Well, yeah, it's so exciting and intimidating at the same time to work on such a great artist as Paul Gauguin. And when the process of building up of the catalogue raisonné passes through very difficult and various stages. I mean,

we start just with the beginning, identifying the list of works to be included to the catalogue raisonné, just the photo, the work, the mentions, techniques, inscriptions, and actual location, if known. After establishing this first corpus of artworks, this first very document, we proceed with establishing the bibliography and the exhibitions list, which is really a very important step in the building of the catalogue raisonné, because it's not only contributing to the *connaissance* of the artist's work, iconography, that gives us the map of scholarship, technique, and material history of it. But also, permits us to shed new light on the question of ownership. Because bibliography sources and exhibitions give us extensive information, sometimes on collectors and lenders, provide us with photography of the *epoque*, and we begin -- at the beginning, we try to from the references, from the live [being?] of the artist and -- until our times. Yeah. And only after compiling this very important piece of information, we can proceed actually with the provenance research, which is crucial.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

EG: To start with your provenance -- yes, to start with the provenance research. Did you use the Wildenstein 1964 catalogue raisonné as the base?

EK: It's not such a base, but of course it's our publication of reference, because it's the first attempt to establish a comprehensive and annotated listing of paintings of Gauguin with a scholarly compendium on the artist's work, based on research and archival sources. It's also a very important source of the visual and scientific knowledge of Gauguin's work. Some paintings by Gauguin, for example, have been destroyed or disappeared during the Second World War. And

sometimes, it's really very difficult to obtain a correct visual of the painting. In these circumstances, it's very useful to have the photo of the painting in the catalogue -- I'm talking precisely about -- no, now, 1894, of "Femme nue assise dans paysage," 1902. Well, while working with the catalogue can be really useful, as well to consult different parts of the catalogue -- I mean, all of them are important. The list of owners, exhibition lists, bibliography. But we don't have to forget that it was a publication of 1964, and there are a lot of mistakes and obsolete information, so we have to check every element of the provenance, everything, and to complement it, to update it, and sometimes, it happens to us to obtain very substantive changes. For example, now I am thinking about "Drame au village" of 1894. It was a great confusion in the catalogue raisonné of 1964 with another painting called "Human Miseries" of 1884. And the history of both paintings were confused. So, thanks to the work with the Vollard archives and the other sources and archives, we were able to make the distinction between these two paintings and establish the correct history of the provenance.

EG: Oh, great. So, also at your disposal were the research files of several scholars that had worked with the Wildenstein Institute in the past. Could you talk a bit about using those files and some of maybe the conflicting evidence that was held in these files, and how you reconciled some of the differing opinions that you came across?

EK: Yeah. That's as well a very important source of -- piece of information for us. But we have to say that -- I mean, analyzing these archive (unclear?) and these several opinions, the most important for us is to focus on the

evidence that each author gives. Even if it's really a very well-known scholar, we can't take his word for the provenance. So, we try to check the information he gives us, crossing with the archival information, documentation we were able to compile on Gauguin, dossier files, and other sources that we're able to consult, for example. I mean, Getty, Bervkyvet for the Danish and Swedish collector, ZADIK, et cetera, et cetera. So, the process is just to focus on the evidence and to check every piece of information, because it's the only possibility to abolish the discrepancies and the so difficult problems of provenances and exhibitions.

EG: So, can you perhaps highlight for us some of the new discoveries or new information that you found in the course of your research?

EK: Yeah, I think something that was really interesting and revelatory for us, it was the existence of a contract existing between Lévy and Chaudet that Gauguin made, signed in 1895, just before he left for the second time to the Tahitian islands. That's very interesting, because it has never actually been very highlighted in the Gauguin scholarly literature, and we were able to identify a number of works that passed through (unclear), through the hands of these dealers. And to know what happened exactly with the painting between his exhibitions in Durand-Ruel in 1893, and with his disastrous sale of 1894, and what happens afterwards. He actually left France forever.

Another important point was to discover how many paintings actually passed through Rosenberg Gallery, in Paris. There were very few known at all, reflected in the catalogue raisonné on Gauguin in 1964, or Thannhauser ownership that

we were able to highlight, thanks to work in the Thannhauser Archives with -- digitized by ZADIK. And it helped us to fill up a lot of gaps in the provenances and shed light on the exhibits -- Gauguin's work in Thannhauser galleries. Another very fascinating thing was about discovery -- works in the collection of Paco Durrio, identification of the works. Some of them were considered as to be lost, and through the consulting of the press of the *epoque*, the references, to know how this collection, by works of Gauguin, were received in Bilbao and in Spain. Another very important point was work with Vollard archives at the Musée d'Orsay and in WPI that permitted us to elucidate a lot of provenance subjects and a lot of issues in regard to a relationship between Gauguin and Vollard and his development, and how -- in what degree he was involved in the organizing of his exhibitions, et cetera. And we were also able to identify a number of exhibits and exhibitions in Vollard's gallery that didn't have any catalogue. So, that's some of the most fascinating points.

EG: That's extraordinary. And so much of this will be completely new to scholars of Gauguin's work, I'm presuming. Because this has never been published before.

EK: Exactly.

EG: For example, you talk about the Lévy and Chaudet contract. Where did you find that?

EK: Oh, we crossed a list of the correspondence of Gauguin in the archives of Gauguin. That's a very important point. Where he gives us [various?] elements: how he signed the contract, the works he left in (unclear?), and then there is in (unclear?) on Chaudet which actually -- the second one is kept in WPI archives, so it was very important to [cross?] around these references and to find out the works.

Also, there is a correspondence between Vollard and (unclear?) and other contemporaries of Gauguin on this subject. Of course, Daniel de Monfreid, and all these evidence permitted us to elucidate this very complex, problematic.

EG: Talk to me a bit about the Gauguin archives at the WPI. When we talk about Gauguin archives, what are we talking about exactly? What are these archives, and who compiled them? Where did they come from?

EK: It depends. When I talk about Gauguin archive, I'm talking as well -- the archives of WPI, where Gauguin is mentioned. I mean, for example, Vollard archives or Chaudet correspondence or correspondence with another artist where Gauguin is mentioned. This is the first -- so there was a lot of information that was compiled before in the dossier files. They're just a piece of archives information. They help us, all this together, to build up the picture of the provenance.

EG: Uh-huh.

EK: But it's not just Gauguin archive in himself; just the fragments of the archives of his writings, of his memories in the archive, or the mention of his name in another connected archive, like Chaudet, Vollard, or others.

EG: From an art historical perspective, I'm wondering if you have a different understanding of Gauguin? Working with these archives, finding new information, perhaps considering some of the relationships that Gauguin had with dealers during his time. Has your understanding of his art changed in any way?

EK: I mean, I can't tell you. I think it -- it permits you to see the artist from another way. It's the history of his life, of his work, but I mean, I don't think -- because I

didn't have any preconception on his work, so that's why it was not possible to change. But of course, I deepened my *connaissance* in the work of Gauguin, on his life, on his way of proceeding with the collectors, with his contemporaries, with his art.

EG: Now, you were working primarily remotely for this catalogue raisonné project. Is that correct? You were working at a desk in an office, either the WPI office and then later during COVID from your home.

EK: Yes.

EG: How -- I presume that most of that research depended upon digital resources. Can you talk a bit about the difference between working with digital resources and working from the paper files that you had at your disposal at the WPI office? Were there any particular contrasts or frustrations or -- what did you find easier?

EK: Well, I think -- I mean, in some ways, I love a lot the contact of paper to the real archive, but as well we have to recognize that working with the digital information can be sometimes more easy, and you can win a lot of time by doing this. So, this is the difference. Both of them are complementary. I think -- yeah.

EG: That's absolutely true. No, certainly during COVID, the digital archive, I imagine -- or the digital resources -- were vital. You wouldn't have been able to continue with the project.

EK: Exactly. Exactly. Which, I mean, even when I was working from WPI, if I didn't have any access to another digital archive, international archives, I wouldn't be able to compile all this valuable information and I wouldn't be here, working hard on it. But if we only were able to work

with dossier files, we wouldn't be able to discover a lot of new things.

EG: That's right. And so, with the publication of the digital catalogue raisonné, do you think that users of catalogue raisonnés will have a better experience? Well, I don't want to load the deck. Let me just say, do you think -- how will their experience change, working with the digital catalogue raisonné as opposed to a print catalogue raisonné?

EK: Yeah, I think -- I mean, there are very substantial advantages the digital catalogue has over its printed counterpart. And it's that you can update and correct information you put in, which is, it's impossible with the printed version. And it's I think -- I know that some scholars think that it's kind of tricky and it's not -- because it's not absolute authority, but I think it's the reverse. We can update the information, because mostly of the published catalogue raisonné in the past, once they were printed, they can be obsolete very quickly, because the information changes very quickly and you were not able to do this. So, I think it's one of the greatest advantages of the digital catalogue raisonné.

And on the other hand, with the digital publication, you have this possibility to explore -- for example, the scans of the sale catalogues and other documentation that you were not able to do with the public version, because of its limited nature. So, I think it will be valued of a great benefit for all the scholars, but as well for the students, the curators, that could have very quick access to -- oh, what are the works, to be able to look up the loans or even the virtual exhibitions for the auction houses. Which is the greatest thing, I think, that it will be very much more

easy to provide the collaboration between different institutions and so to deepen the *connaissance* in the work of Gauguin. I mean, and all of other artists.

EG: Great. I'm wondering, looking back at this project and all of the work that you did on it, what are some of the resources you wished you had at your disposal? Like, are there any archives out there that you know of that hadn't been digitized when you started? And if you could just put a wish out there to the public, which ones would you want?

EK: There is a lot of regrets, because for example, a lot of -- I mean, we have part of Scandinavian archives, but only part of them that's (unclear?), because Gauguin was very linked to those collectors and it would be extremely interesting to see them talking. I mean, for example, exhibition of Gauguin in 1893, it would be very interesting to have access to the photos of these exhibitions. Or for example, I'm thinking as well on Russia, a lot, because a lot of archives -- I mean, we have conducted -- the museums and the archives there, they could share some of them with us, but sometimes, it's not possible. Some archives are closed and it's really a pity that we couldn't have access to it.

EG: Can you be a bit more specific? Can you tell us which institutions, perhaps, we might want to implore to digitize some of their archives?

EK: I think the one institution in Russia which is very crucial for Gauguin, I think it's Pushkin Museum archives. They are very, very important, and it would be really very great to have access to them.

EG: And in Scandinavia?

EK: In Scandinavia, I'm talking about -- [Bervkyvet?] archive, which is in Copenhagen. That would be very interesting to

have. And then, we have the archives of Osthaus in Essen that would be really very important as well, because you had to go there; they couldn't send you anything. And so, we didn't have enough time to do so. It's a pity too, because there is correspondence concerning the works that were sold by Vollard, just after Gauguin's death in 1903, so I am fascinated to know exactly which paintings, what date, all this correspondence.

EG: So with the catalogue raisonné, the beauty of the digital catalogue raisonné is that you can link to images from the archives. So, we'll be linking to images from the Vollard archive, I presume, and to other archival inventory lists that we might have in-house. Are there any digitized archives that you think we will also be linking to that are outside of the WPI?

EK: Yeah, I think so. I think it would be important to link all the archives from ZADIK, that's really very important. I think we will be linking -- American Archive of Art. I guess we will be linking -- Getty. Some of MoMA archives. Yeah, there will be a number of archives that we will link aside from Wildenstein.

EG: Can you talk about some of the digitized archives from other institutions that you were impressed with? Who's done a good job in digitizing their archives? (laughs)

EK: (sighs) Good job. (laughter) I mean, sometimes the sources are really very valuable but the presentation of it -- it's really confusing, so. (laughs) For me, I've worked a lot in the past as well with ZADIK, so I love a lot their -- I mean, the quantity of their digitized items they do have. Because for example, for Getty, it was just a part of them, but not all of them. For example, (unclear?) but for Getty, when you go to Thannhauser and some others, you have a lot

of information, but sometimes it's not presented in a good way. And if you're not a very good (laughs) language speaker, it would be difficult for you to find out information you look for. Another point is that only some of them present it. I mean, sometimes it's just the transcriptions, so it's a pity. But otherwise, it's really complete.

EG: Great. So, I would hope that the digital catalogue raisonné for Gauguin that you and your colleagues are about to publish will encourage archival repositories to digitize some of their holdings so that you can link to them. With this digital publication, once it goes live, will you be updating it?

EK: Of course. This is one of the greatest advantages of the online catalogue raisonné. So, yeah, of course we will update it. New information as well, we will be welcoming the researchers to collaborate with us, sharing their insights and new information they could have on it.

EG: That's very exciting. Well, Evgenia, is there anything else that you want to talk about that we haven't covered here?

EK: No, it's okay. Thank you.

EG: (laughs) Thank you. Jenn, do you have anything that you'd like to speak about or ask Evgenia about?

JENN GIMBLETT: No, that was wonderful. I feel like I learned so much. (laughter)

EG: Well, thank you very much Evgenia.

EK: Thank you.

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