

Portrait of the Artist AS A MYCOLOGIST

David O. Born

The list of artists leaving me awestruck is not long. The sheer scope of DaVinci's talent and intellect is breathtaking. Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings move me in ways I find difficult to explain, and I have walked through the shadowed forests and sun-lit valleys of the American West and know Albert Bierstadt's paintings to be true. I could name perhaps a dozen other artists whose works have lit such fires in my soul. This

week, I added a new name to that list: Alexander Viazmensky, a painter whose mycological art is astonishing.

Here is a man whose heart belongs to the fungi of Mother Russia. So devoted is he to rendering each mushroom with precision that he spends many hours foraging for the right specimens. He might gather a hundred or more examples of *Boletus edulis*, one of his favorites, before returning to his studio. When he's lucky, and the work is going well, Viazmensky may complete a painting in four to six days. Even when

the subject is one that he's painted a dozen times before, it can take weeks. But make no mistake, he is driven to capture his particular vision, to perfect his expression of it. His dedication to his art and the ephemeral nature of mushrooms take him to the field often to harvest fresh models, and he may spend up to a year on a single work before he judges it acceptable for viewing.

I am neither an artist, nor a mycologist, so Viazmensky's paintings would have escaped me had it not been for Minnesota Public Radio. They



produced an intriguing segment which sent me hurrying to Minneapolis' Museum of Russian Art before their (extended) feature of his paintings closed in March. This was the Russian's most recent North American exhibit, and it's not known when next his work will be available to the American viewing public. I count as one of life's blessings the opportunity to enter his world.

And, speaking of blessings, housed in a former church, The Museum of Russian Art is a hidden gem in a city known for its excellent museums and cultural venues. As I entered the large, main gallery, hundreds of Russian nesting dolls focused their eyes on me. With all those little children hiding behind grandmother's apron, you would expect to hear a lot of chattering, but if that were the case, they fell silent as I moved past them to the exhibit area holding Viazmensky's work.

Their silence was fitting, because at the doorway to the gallery, I felt that sense of reverence one feels when stepping into the sanctuary of a great cathedral. Brightly lit and spaciouly arranged, the watercolors reflect the work of a master. One visitor, passing by as I stood overlooking the room, spoke softly to

her companion. "He's a genius."

But, if I am to be honest, what grabs me first is not the paintings. As I turn into the room, my eyes snap to a large photograph directly ahead. I've never seen so many large mushrooms at once. *Boletus edulis* overflowing an outdoor table; behind them Viazmensky sits, regal himself, as he looks over his treasure-trove.

"Come in. Have a seat," he seems to say. "Just look at this bountiful harvest."

I feel an immediate kinship with "Sasha," as he's known to his friends. In truth, what moves me I cannot name. I see the man at his stone-tiled table, seated amid brambles beneath a scraggly apple tree. I note his simple workman's shirt, but above all, I see the man and his mushrooms, his wry smile welcoming. That single image tugs at me as would a magnet, drawing me into his circle. His gaze reminds me of my grandfather on his hard-scrabble farm in Ohio, the flickering light in his eyes betraying just a hint of mischief.

But Sasha's hands: above all ... his hands. The few photos I've seen of him show his hands, fingers large like a farmer's, muscular, not the soft and delicate fingers we so often typecast as

artistic. A few specks of dirt under the nails, brought from the field to the easel. These are the hands of a man whose soul is rooted in the earth and its creations, a man who belongs in fields and the woods beyond.

I, too, love the natural world and I suspect it's there the connection lies. Examine his *Amanita* and you'll see wisps of field grasses alongside the fungus. Pine needles, cones, and twigs enhance the *Boletus edulis*. *Fomitopsis rosea* has imbedded itself in spruce bark, with moss clinging to the fungi like some colonial power asserting its sense of entitlement. As in many of his paintings, his *Russula Bouquet III* shows evidence of forest critters, slugs, squirrels, or mice, perhaps. And dirt! What a tribute to realism, for who among you has ever found a mushroom without a scab of soil clinging to it?

When looking at these paintings, I suspect ardent mushroom hunters would note the precise form and coloration. They would recognize the attention given to the gills, the ridges, and other morphological features. Indeed, I sent my friend Larry Millman, a frequent contributor to FUNGI, the link to a painting of the *Cantharellus cibarius*.



He remarked on the colors (accurate and lifelike), the ridges (drawn with precision and care), the form (wonderfully illustrated), the proportions (pleasingly exact), and the variations (realistic). Less informed, I can't vouch for Larry's observations. To me, Sasha's mushroom is simply a thing of beauty.

I know nothing of mushroom technicalities, the diagnostic criteria. Instead the exhibit washes over me, a rainbow of natural color, sensuous shapes, and, up close, incredible detail. Until this day, I was only familiar with the brown and white mushrooms which pop up in my yard, the scant harvest of morels I found only once, and puffballs in the woods. But Viazmsensky has opened my eyes, excited my curiosity. He has edged me closer to the slippery slope of mycology.

My attraction to his watercolors comes not from the left side of my brain, but from another place, from my heart. I look at this work and my eyes glide to the forest litter, to the mushroom's context. Truly, the *in situ* evidence catches my attention, sparks my imagination. Viazmsensky doesn't show me what a *Boletus* is, he gives me a *Boletus*. Other viewers might focus on

the mushroom, but I feel myself pulled into the fungi ecosphere. I feel the damp, smell the decay, and hear stirrings in the undergrowth, birds overhead.

What manner of man can work such magic? Born in 1946, Viazmsensky's parents died when he was very young. His grandmother and an aunt assumed responsibility for him. Despite their care, he spent a portion of his youth in an orphanage. When old enough, he went on to Leningrad Technical College to study electrical engineering. He worked in that field for only five years, leaning into the arts by designing jewelry, painting and drawing whenever he could. Soon, he joined other artists selling their works on the streets, and in 1984 he graduated from the Graphic Design School in Leningrad. He followed his training there with studies at the Leningrad Academy of Arts, graduating in 1991.

The renowned British botanist, art collector, and philanthropist, Dr. Shirley Sherwood, discovered his work early on and realized how he had elevated botanical art. She hastened to introduce it to the Western world, and she put much of it on display in London and elsewhere. Sherwood's promotion

of Viazmsensky's art helped generate enthusiasm for his first American exhibit in Pittsburgh in 1992.

Sherwood has the somewhat unique perspective of knowing a good deal about art as well as botany. Millman, with his extensive knowledge of fungi, describes the paintings as "simply extraordinary." The renditions, he said, "transcend simple mycology. They go beyond the level of illustration and take the viewer effortlessly into the highest realms of art. The accuracy and realism achieved by the artist are uncanny."

Sherwood and Millman are not alone in their appreciation of these paintings. Following the 1992 exhibit, more and more people became aware of Viazmsensky's talents and demand for his creations rose slowly, but steadily. Galleries in Sweden, Italy, Poland, Japan, and the U.K. have displayed his paintings. He has traveled frequently to the USA, appearing at gallery showings, teaching masterclasses, making friends, and exploring the landscape for mushrooms.

It is worth noting that Sasha taught his first watercolor class in Minnesota in 2008, followed by many others elsewhere. Working with his students helped him understand the attraction

To learn more:

- The breadth of Viazmensky's work: <http://www.alexandermushrooms.com/>
- Dr. Shirley Sherwood's collection of Viazmensky's Art: <https://shirleysherwood.com/~492>
- The Museum of Russian Art: <https://tmora.org/>
- The Minnesota Public Radio program on the exhibition: <https://www.mprnews.org/story/2025/01/10/art-friend-heads-to-the-museum-of-russian-art-for-a-journey-into-the-world-of-mushrooms>
- Licensed art products based on Viazmensky's paintings: <https://www.pomegranate.com/search?q=Viazmensky+>
- Alexander Viazmensky's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100010622476438>

his artistic focus had for people. In addition to his students, his expanded contacts with other artists and collectors pointed out the relative lack of botanical art, as such, in Russia. "There was only scientific illustration," he has noted.

He made arrangements with the Botanical Institute in St. Petersburg to teach classes, with the goal of simply introducing staff and others to mycological painting. More to the point, he displayed his passion for portraying natural objects, such as fungi, as credible subjects for the artist. Word of his efforts and their popularity spread. Soon he was teaching in Moscow as well. In 2016, he and others organized the First St. Petersburg Exhibition of Botanical Painting and one of his students led the creation of a similar exhibit in Moscow. The level of participation in and enthusiasm for these showing led another of Viazmensky's students to form the Russian Society of Artists of Botanical Art, also in 2016. Today, many

of his students are now teaching others.

Thanks to recognition of his work and his frequent trips to the States, Sasha soon developed relationships with people in the American art community. However, his strongest and most enduring friendship has been with a fellow student from his Leningrad engineering days. Michael Peltsman immigrated to the USA in 1977, but their friendship has endured and they communicate almost daily via WhatsApp and other video conferencing technology. In addition to the Sherwood Gallery in London, Peltsman serves as Viazmensky's agent and handles logistics with galleries and museums across the US on behalf of his friend.

Peltsman lives in Minnesota and the state has been a way-station if not a destination for Sasha on his many trips to the USA. Several times he was able to stay for months, using his time to conduct art classes and give presentations on mycological art.

On one of his early trips, Viazmensky met another Minnesotan and former NAMA board member, the late Lee Muggli. An accomplished photographer, Muggli offered his Northwoods cabin to the artist to use as a studio and retreat. It is noteworthy that Viazmensky didn't speak any English during his first visits, but he worked hard to teach himself the language. Of course, it wasn't all hard work. While he was staying in Muggli's cabin, the duo would frequent a local bar, and he explains that after two or three beers, he was speaking English much better. His facility with language and his diligence (along with the beers) soon brought him to fluency.

When I asked Peltsman what Sasha the man is like, his face softened into a smile and he spoke thoughtfully and with respect. "Foremost," he said, "Sasha is a compassionate man. Eager to help people and to treat them with kindness always." He explained that when Viazmensky was in the orphanage, bullies made his life miserable. Instead of becoming a bully himself, or fighting back in a rage, Viazmensky's personality led him to respond with empathy to others who were experiencing similar treatment. To this day, he goes to great pains not to offend others. His sense of courtesy showed recently when he was reviewing a letter Peltsman had written on his behalf, responding to a somewhat

egregious request from an admirer. Viazmensky wanted the wording changed to be less brusque, more conciliatory and encouraging. "He's like that, always. He goes to extremes to be kind to people."

As a further example, Peltsman notes Viazmensky, like other artists, suffers from frequent theft of his work. The internet has made it easy for people to steal artwork, to make and sell stationery, mugs, and other sundry items. Pomegranate, the company licensed by Viazmensky to sell such products, treats their artist with fairness and integrity. "It's the little people, random individuals, who do the damage. They can steal and sell someone's art one day, and the next they've disappeared. It's a difficult problem for artists." Viazmensky gets distressed when such things happen, but "he is always positive, always kind, always trying to be good to people."

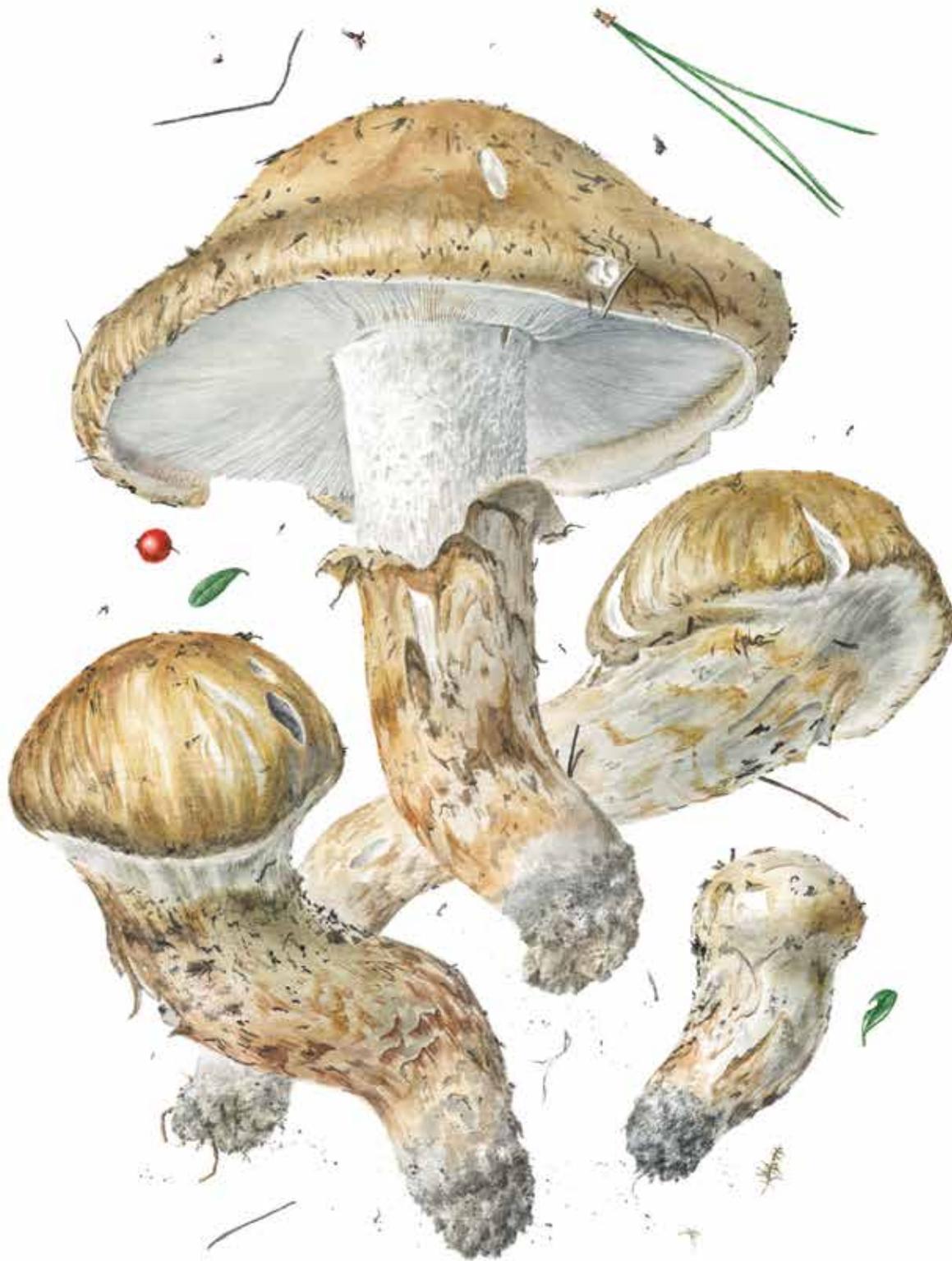
When he isn't teaching classes in St. Petersburg or Moscow, Alexander Viazmensky lives simply in the forest with his wife, who is reported to be an outstanding cook. He can spend hours foraging, with one pail for the table and another for the studio. Like other mycologists I've known, he hungers for the undiscovered meadow, the woods beyond, the treasures yet unfound.

Michael Peltsman, his old friend and agent, related a story about Viazmensky's passion for the hunt. Lacking both a license and an interest in driving, Sasha depended on public transportation and friends to get from one place to another, even when the destination might be a far-off parkland or forested area. Shortly after he turned seventy, a friend offered to drive him to a remote region where Viazmensky had never foraged. When they arrived, they found what seemed to be field upon field of mushrooms. It was a mycologist's dream and an artist's fantasy. After returning to his studio, Viazmensky realized it might be ages before he could find someone to take him back, so great was the distance. Ever resourceful, at seventy-two he enrolled in driving school, got his license, purchased an old used car, and shed his dependence on others. He's still driving, still foraging, and still painting.

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Amanita muscaria, courtesy Michael Peltsman.



11.06

Tricholoma magnivelare (White Matsutake)

Alexander Viazmensky



9.04

Gomphidius glutinosus

Alexander Viazmensky