



*Mother Russia in east London:
a propaganda flag from gallery owner
Nonna Materkova's personal collection*

mother was a maths teacher and my father was deputy head of the Naval Academy. In those days, we didn't have any entertainment, so we spent our weekends in museums and galleries.'

After studying economics and finance at St Petersburg State University, Materkova spent 10 years in the city administration of St Petersburg, and then arrived in London on a Yeltsin scholarship for young business leaders at the London School of Economics. 'It was worth £636 a month,' she says. 'I rented a room overlooking a brick wall. It was exciting. I am a very positive person.' Soon, she had set up Roslink, her finance consultancy for Russian companies. She also became interested in art and began to collect.

During the recent surge in the Russian art market, Materkova felt uncomfortable that it revolved around a few rich men throwing funny, silly and hot money at famous names. She also observed that the West's knowledge of Russian art ran out soon after literature, music and ballet, and drew a complete blank on contemporary art – although, to be fair, Russians' knowledge of the arts goes little further, since contemporary art never officially existed until perestroika. Calvert 22 helps plug that gap. By unleashing her curators from commercial constraints, Materkova can take Calvert 22 where dollar-driven galleries wouldn't dare. It has nothing to do with collecting and selling, but everything to do with shedding exciting new light on the creative soul of Mother Russia, picking out artists such as Moscow conceptualists Vadim Zakharov, Pavel Pepperstein and Yuri Albert. Calvert 22's first three shows have been hailed a great success from all quarters.

Materkova's mission has crept. She now sees Calvert 22 as a cultural bridge between Russia and Britain, and an exchange for ideas. 'Last week, the Russian deputy minister of finance invited me to participate in a round-table discussion for Russian financiers with the Lord Mayor of London,' she

says. 'It is great when financiers exchange information, but it would be nice if ordinary people could do the same. It is so important for the investment climate and image of my country and its culture. She plans to use Calvert 22 as a venue for Intelligence Squared, the debating institution owned by John Gordon, her business partner at Calvert 22. According to Gordon, debates will be based on contemporary art, but will be strictly non-reverential. Intelligence Squared has now spawned Intelligence Shared, a private club that Materkova has founded, which will also meet at Calvert 22. She also whispers about plans to set up an interface between young Russian and young British artists.

'I do this because it is interesting,' she says. 'I am not thinking about glamour and social pages and being seen. It is a pure passion. I am concerned about Russia's image. Of course, Russia is not perfect, but it has wonderful things. Calvert 22 will show that Russia is more sophisticated than longer yachts or fatter jets.' As if there might be some doubt on the matter, she adds: 'I don't have either.'

'People are recognising that money is not everything,' she continues. 'Okay, I have a bit, but I don't feel happier for it. Before perestroika, we had nothing. We were well educated, and of course we had... weird things in the past. But we didn't compete materially.' Listening to Materkova downplay money's role in society, it is hard to believe she is one of Russia's top economists, but perhaps economics in Russia are different.

What, I asked, is the most powerful illustration of her success at Calvert 22? Column inches? Footfall? 'It happened at an art party,' she says. 'An artist introduced me to someone saying: "This is Nonna Materkova, she has an amazing gallery in London which treat artists properly." * * *

Calvert 22, 22 Calvert Avenue, London E2, Calvert22.com