

## Local gallery welcomes Russian artists' invasion

By Deb Pastner  
Staff writer

The Russians have come. Six artists from the eastern Russian cities of Khabarovsk and Vladivostok arrived in Steilacoom with artwork under their arms.

For the next month, these visitors will show their works at Vostok Northwest, Steilacoom's Russian art gallery.

The visit is thanks to the dedication of Vostok director Lois Birt. Birt has made 13 trips to Russia. She's run the gallery for two years. Birt has met many Russian artists — meaning she can give them the chance to come to the United States for a month and exhibit their art.

"They're all old friends to me," she said.

It's an opportunity that the artists appreciate.

"I think this trip will give me a larger outlook on the world," Evguini Manner of Vladivostok said through an interpreter. Manner is a graphic artist. Manner brought 19 of his gouache-based paintings.

Irina Orkina, who has never been to the United States before, doesn't believe she could have made this trip 10 years ago.

"The Communist regime was much harder. Now it's easier. There's no censorship. Before,

### If you're interested

The exhibit at Vostok Northwest, 210 Wilkes St., Steilacoom, continues through Nov. 30. For more information, call 584-5328.

they used to tell me to draw and paint only beautiful things — no naked ladies, please," Orkina said. She has shown her ceramics and drawings in China, as well as Russia.

Already on his third visit to Vostok Northwest, Alexander Krasnik is an old hand at the American art scene. Although his landscape paintings pay the bills back home, Krasnik hopes one day to present a show of his science fiction paintings in the United States.

"I look at American artists, how they do their marketing. It's very much possible that an exhibition in Seattle will be arranged," he said, half in English and half in Russian. "I'm looking for new markets, new business."

For another artist, the visit to Steilacoom has been hard-won.

Leonid Dubenkovski, a photographer from Vladivostok, tried to come to last year's group exhibit. But the American consulate turned down his visa application five times. He ran

into embassy officials who feared that he would want to stay in the United States.

This year, it only took four applications before Dubenkovski was granted a visa. He has yet to arrive for the Vostok show.

The other artists in the show — Andrei Moranov, Sergei Zubov and Alexi Cherkassov — have together brought works ranging from enamel and copper-based iconographic art to oil paintings to watercolors on silk.

Birt believes that bringing Russian artists and their work to other countries is only the first step in helping them succeed.

That's why she's hoping to open a sister gallery of Vostok Northwest in Khabarovsk by next spring. It will be a place where tourists can buy Russian art more easily than they can now.

Birt's visitors say life isn't always easy for an artist in Russia.

"The trouble is that formerly, artists could support themselves. Nowadays, it's more difficult, because of market calculations. It's good to have no censorship — freedom is better. But the government should help artists, in our country and in America as well," said Zubov.



Irina Orkina shows two of her ceramic pieces. She traveled from Khabarovsk, Russia to participate in the month-long show at Steilacoom's Vostok Northwest.